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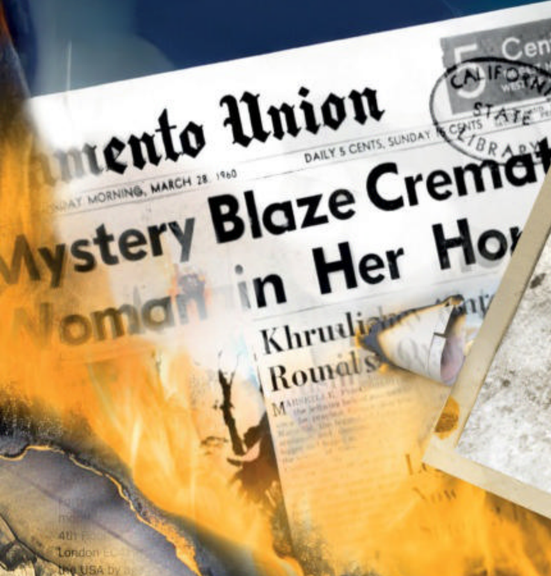

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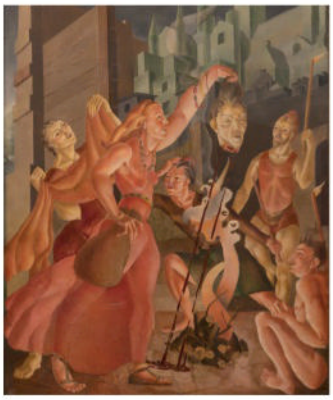
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Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

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In July 1964, two Liverpool neighbourhoods were, according to news reports of the time, invaded by leprechauns, with gangs of local children mounting a full-scale hunt for the little people. **DR MIKE BENBOUGH-JACKSON** returns to the scene and asks what in 1960s Britain might have sparked this odd episode…

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ForteanTimes
SPONTANEOUS HUMAN COMBUSTION

COVER
ETIENNE GILFILLAN

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EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

UP IN SMOKE

Spontaneous human combustion is one of those alleged fortean phenomena that despite being roundly damned by professional sceptics such as the late Joe Nickell (whose obituary will follow in a future issue of FT) and dismissed by scientists as a result of the 'wick effect', continues to exert a powerful fascination; whether this is due to the handful of shocking photographs that record the aftermath of these deadly fires – whatever their immediate cause – or the recurrence of the idea in popular culture from Melville and Dickens to *The X-Files* and *Spinal Tap* is difficult to judge. It's certainly a topic that we have returned to on a number of occasions over the years, even though putative cases remain rare; the last we recall was in Ireland in 2010, where the death of a 76-year-old Galway man was deemed controversially by the coroner to be the result of SHC; in a surprisingly fortean statement, he said: "This fire was thoroughly investigated and I'm left with the conclusion that this fits into the category of spontaneous human combustion, for which there is no adequate explanation." (See **FT281:14-15**.)

Larry Arnold, author of the comprehensive and case-rich 1996 book *Ablaze!*, has plenty of examples of cases in which thorough investigation of fires has yielded similarly baffling results, despite coroners returning rather different verdicts. Larry remains one of the most dogged of SHC researchers, having spent decades tracking down possible cases and travelling the length and breadth of the US to conduct personal investigations and interviews with both first responders and victims' next of kin. Here, in a major three-part article for FT, Larry re-opens some of his hottest case files, takes aim at the SHC naysayers and presents his best evidence for the reality of the phenomenon. (For further discussion of SHC, see **FT50:52-55, 63:44-50, 74:29-32, 75:37-40, 79:40-43, 88:32-33, 116:58, 171:20, 187:39-42**.)

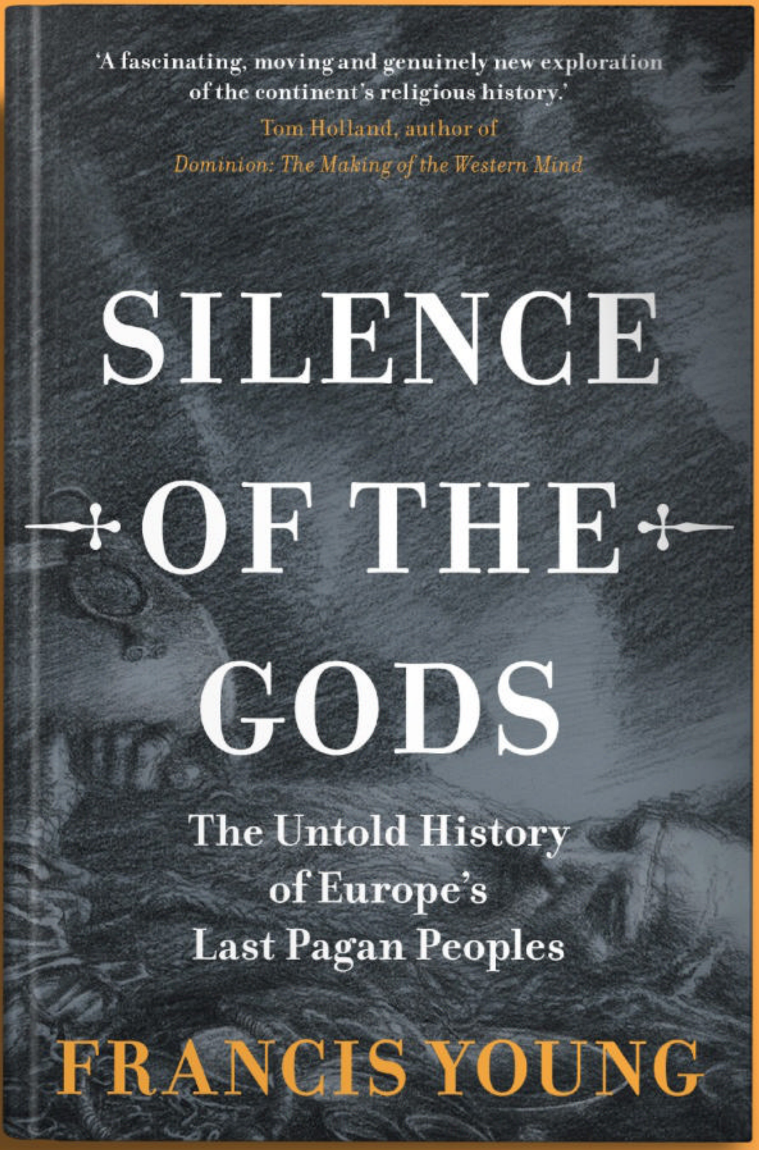
ALL BALLS?

Mexican "UFO researcher" Jaime Maussan, the one-man industry responsible for such dubious gems as the 'Roswell mummies', is back in the news with his latest find – a supposedly alien artefact known as the Buga Sphere (see pp.4-5). As we go to press, the story has taken another strange turn, with Maussan now claiming that his mysterious alien orb was the target of an attempted theft by a shadowy group disguised as police (*D.Mail, 23 June 2025*). We'll bring you updates on any further twists and ludicrous claims next issue.

Elsewhere, Lisa Gledhill visits a major exhibition of work by neglected British artist and occultist Ithell Colquhoun, Bob Fischer ventures into weirdest Essex with the makers of the distinctly fortean podcast *Broken Veil*, and Dr Mike Benbough-Jackson revisits the 1964 Liverpool leprechaun hunt to ask what forces were at work in mid-Sixties Britain that could have given rise to such a bizarre incident.

ERRATA

FT456:64-67: Stalwart stumble-spotter Tom Ruffles writes: "I thoroughly enjoyed Matt Salusbury's Fortean Traveller article on Grutas Park, but noticed a couple of minor errors. He refers to Felix Dzerzhinsky setting up the NKVD. Dzerzhinsky founded the Cheka at the end of 1917. He did not set up the NKVD. Matt also gives the dates of the Great Patriotic War as 1941-1944, which is a typo as of course it concluded on 9 May 1945."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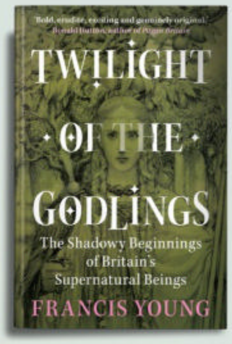

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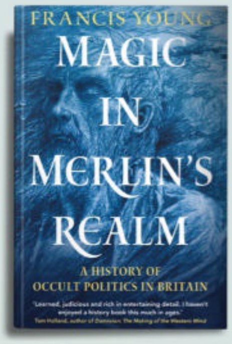

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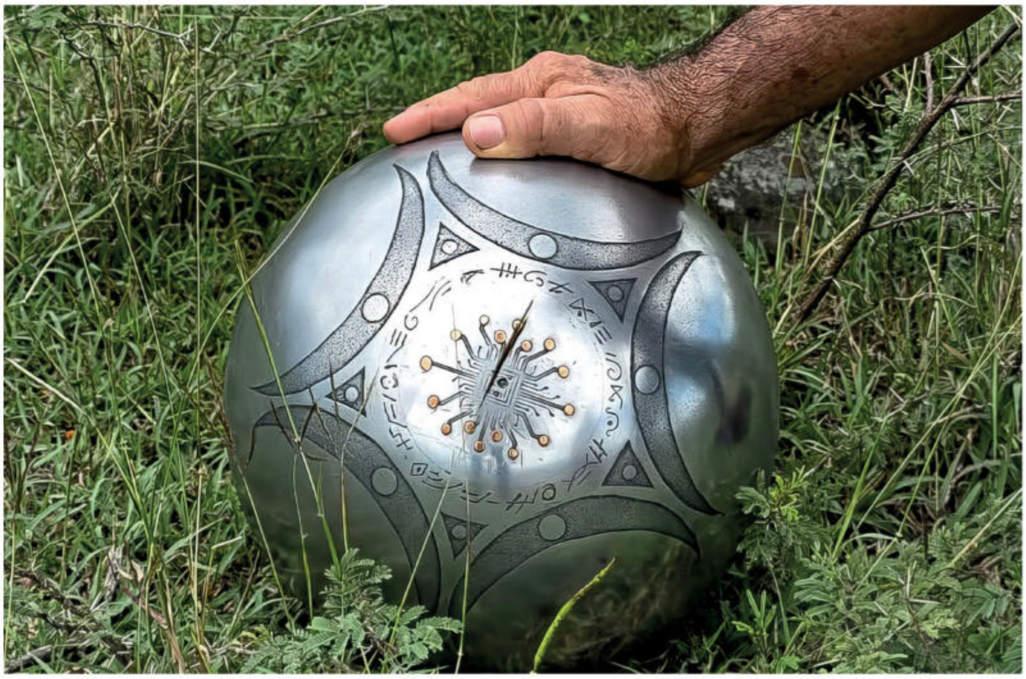
A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

BUGA ME SIDEWAYS!

UFOs over Colombia and a mysterious metal sphere bearing "a message to humanity"

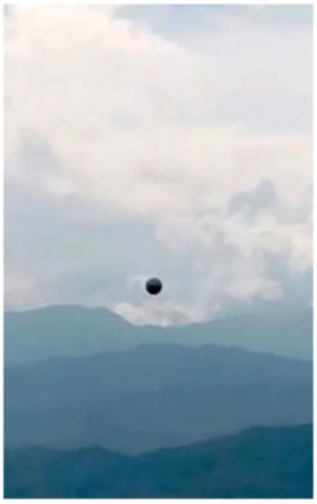


LEFT: The 'Buga Sphere', allegedly found in woodland near the city of Buga, Colombia. **BELOW**: Earlier in March there were reports, and videos, of a spherical UFO flying over the area.

On 2 March, a spherical UFO was spotted making erratic zigzag movements over the city of Buga in Colombia. Shortly afterwards, a group of people recovered a metal sphere, roughly the size of a football and weighing about four and a half pounds (2kg), from woodland in the city. They believe this was the UFO sighted earlier, although no one saw it make a landing.

One of its finders, David Velez el Potro, said that his companion, named only as Jose, "felt sick for days" after touching the object, adding "When I poured water on it, it started to smoke and the water vaporised instantly"; although, confusingly, he also says the sphere had "the temperature of a refrigerator." His group retrieved the object, seemingly without it making anyone else ill, and, claims el Potro, they were immediately asked by the Colombian Government to hand it over. However, he says he refused on the grounds that it would "never be seen again"; the Government apparently accepted this and left the sphere with him.

There are symbols the team thought might be from ancient scripts



Instead, el Potro gave it to Mexican UFO personality Jaime Maussan, best known for his support for the Peruvian "UFO mummies", later identified as looted and abused corpses from archæological sites, and for publicising a long stream of later discredited "UFO" and "alien" related discoveries (see **FT329:26-27, 335:26, 437:17, 441:24, 450:28**). Maussan had the Buga Sphere analysed by what he described as his team of experts, who largely operate outside academia and official institutions, including radiographer Jose Luis Velazquez, who had it X-rayed in what, from the photos published, looks more like a hospital facility than a specialised research lab.

While Velasquez has made it clear that investigation of the Buga Sphere is continuing, he announced what had been discovered so far. The team found that "it shows no evidence of welding", which, Velazquez believes, would have been found on a human-made object, and that "its internal structure is composed of high-density elements". The X-rays of the Sphere showed that it has three layers made of metal-like material and that it has irregular edges, "indicating that it is a solid object", according to Velasquez. He added that the outer layer was the densest area, almost possessing the density of human bone, and could be made of titanium or steel, but that further research and analysis was needed to confirm this. Inside, the X-rays showed a central nucleus of 18 microspheres, which Velasquez terms "a chip", and a central band of a different material, containing more small spheres. Velasquez believes that these may have been placed inside the object before it was sealed. "It is a very rare piece… I've never seen a piece like this," he said.

The exterior of the Sphere was found to be interesting too, being inscribed with crescent Moon-like shapes and others reminiscent of an eye-in-the-pyramid symbol. There are also further symbols that the team thought might be from ancient scripts, such as runes,

SIGNS AND PORTENTS
Prophecies in comics and coffee grounds
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Dismembered unfortunates and their haunts
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MEDICAL MATTERS
Sticky situations and parasitic twins
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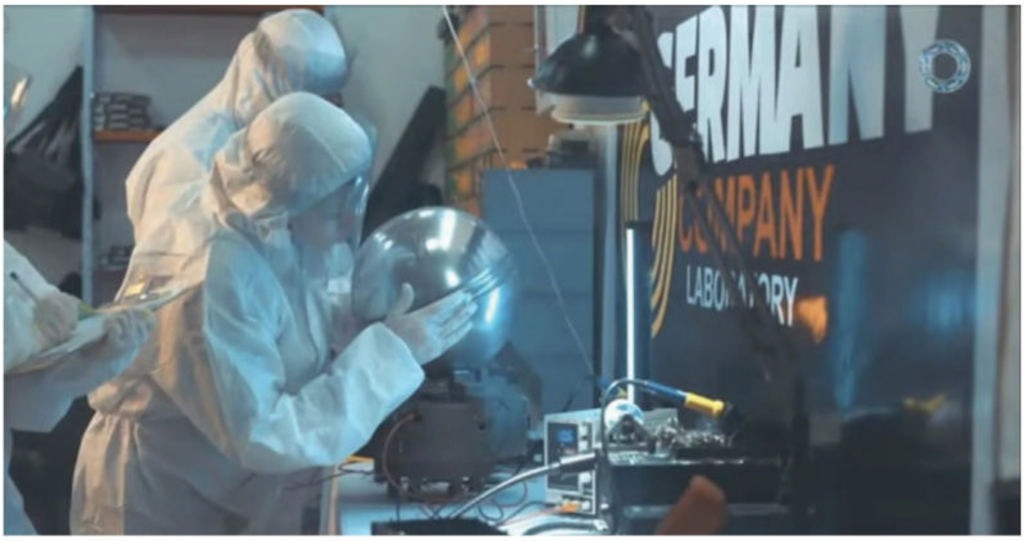


ABOVE: The Sphere was supposedly examined by a team of experts, but the facilities seen in videos looked more like a hospital than a specialised research lab. **BELOW:** Mexican UFO personality Jaime Maussan communes with the mystery object.

Ogham and various Mesopotamian writing systems. Baffled by their meaning, Velasquez’s team turned to AI to decipher them, getting a result that read: “The origin of birth through union and energy in the cycle of transformation, meeting point of unity, expansion, and consciousness – individual consciousness.” The researchers felt that this was a “message to humanity, encouraging a collective shift in consciousness to help Mother Earth”.

The announcement of these findings has had a mixed reception. The UFO believer community in the USA has swallowed the UFO interpretation wholesale and become very excited about the Buga Sphere, while elsewhere a strong note of scepticism has been sounded. Fundamentally, the key objections are that there is nothing to connect the Sphere directly to the earlier UFO sighting, that the research shows evidence of being carried out by people who have no idea how to investigate such a find, and that the published findings are not only self-contradictory in places but read more like someone stringing together a lot of “sciencey” words than actual science. Apart from Velasquez, it is not clear who the “researchers” are, or what their qualifications might be for investigating an allegedly alien object, nor whether they have adequate facilities for the work required. No evidence has been provided as to which AI model was used in the translation, or why it might have been suitable for turning a mysterious jumble of possibly ancient scripts into the vacuous New Age pablum that emerged.

Dr Julia Mossbridge, a cognitive neuroscientist and UAP researcher from the University of San Diego’s Department of Physics and Biophysics, said that the Sphere “looks to me like a really cool art project,” and suggested that “Before you decide something’s anomalous or a UFO, bring the object to a group like the Galileo Project.” This is the international research project founded by Harvard University astrophysicist Avi Loeb, which has the knowledge and facilities to make a thorough analysis of potential alien artefacts (see **FT410:30, 412:6-7**). Mossbridge emphasised the importance of getting unusual objects like the Sphere to nongovernmental, nonpartisan research groups, whether the Galileo Project or the Scientific Coalition for UAP Studies, saying “They are all trying to get rigorous information themselves, not necessarily waiting on the federal government, about what’s going on in our skies, what’s going on in our waters, and actually trying to get international cooperation around these things.”

Until such organisations get a look at the Buga Sphere, it is unlikely to gain significant credibility as an alien artefact, given the standards of the analysis it has been subjected to so far. *thesun.ie, 10 May; people.com, dailymail.co.uk, foxnews.com, 25 May; metro.co.uk, 29 May 2025.*

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT’S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

THE SEA MONSTER RETURNS

Economist, 25 May 2024.

Werewolf tots are on the rise

D.Star, 10 Dec 2024.

RAT URINE FLAVOUR VAPES ON OFFER?

Spalding Voice, 20 Feb 2025.

Man’s pop-up urinal death may never be explained, family fears

BBC News, 9 Feb 2025.

NEW LASER EQUIPMENT TO HELP BURN PATIENTS

Brighton Argus, 8 April 2025.

Unknown flying flaming objects helped spread huge Dagenham fire that left 80 homeless

Evening Standard, 25 April 2025.

SIDELINES

MOTH MANSION

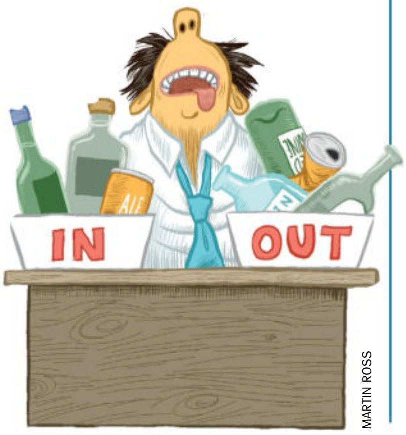
Iya Patarkatsishvili and her husband Yevhen Hunyak were expecting a life of luxury when they bought a Notting Hill mansion for £32.5 million, but after moving in they found they were overwhelmed by clothes moths (*Tineola bisselliella*), swatting dozens every day. The moths ate their clothes and carpets and got into everything, including food, wine and toothbrushes, and resisted all attempts at extermination. Eventually the couple threw in the towel and left, successfully suing the seller to get their money back, plus damages. *editions.cnn.com, 11 Feb 2025.*

CRISPED

Unable to open a bag of crisps, a man in Dalton, Georgia, decided to use a lighter to burn his way into the packet instead. “While doing this, the man accidentally set himself on fire while sitting in a recliner,” explained city spokesperson Bruce Frazier. Even though a quick-thinking maintenance worker hosed him to put the fire out, the man suffered third degree burns over 75% of his body. Because they are a mix of starch and oil, and have a large surface area, crisps are exceptionally flammable and can be used as kindling in an emergency. *metro.co.uk, 4 Jan 2024.*

WORKAHOL

Struggling to attract new talent and unable to afford competitive salaries, small Japanese companies are coming up with increasingly imaginative incentives to attract applicants. Tech start-up Trust Ring Co. in Osaka has one of the most creative; they are offering staff free alcoholic drinks during working hours and hangover leave to recover if they overindulge. *odditycentral.com 7 Feb 2025.*



MARTIN ROSS

SIGNS & PORTENTS

2025 looks dangerous, but the world won’t end until 2060...

DOUGLAS SPROTT / FLICKR / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE: In March 2011, the Tohuku region of Japan was struck by a massive earthquake and tsunami. **BELOW**: Manga artist Ryo Tatsuki appeared to have predicted this and other events in her 1999 strip *The Future I Saw*, and a new version hints at another earthquake this July. **BOTTOM**: As a result, Hong Kong TV personality Qi Xian Yu, also know as Master Seven, has warned people to stay away from Japan – advice that many Chinese tourits are heeding.

MANGA PANIC

In 1999, Japanese manga artist Ryo Tatsuki published a strip called *The Future I Saw*, which featured a cartoon version of herself sharing her visions and dreams. In it, she predicted a major disaster hitting Japan in March 2011. At the time this did not attract any particular attention, but when a massive earthquake did strike the Tohoku region in March 2011, wrecking the Fukushima nuclear plant, it made Tatsuki famous across Asia. Analysing her work, Tatsuki’s fans believe she not only predicted the Tohoku quake, but also the earlier Kobe one and the Covid pandemic, as well as the deaths of Princess Diana and Freddie Mercury.

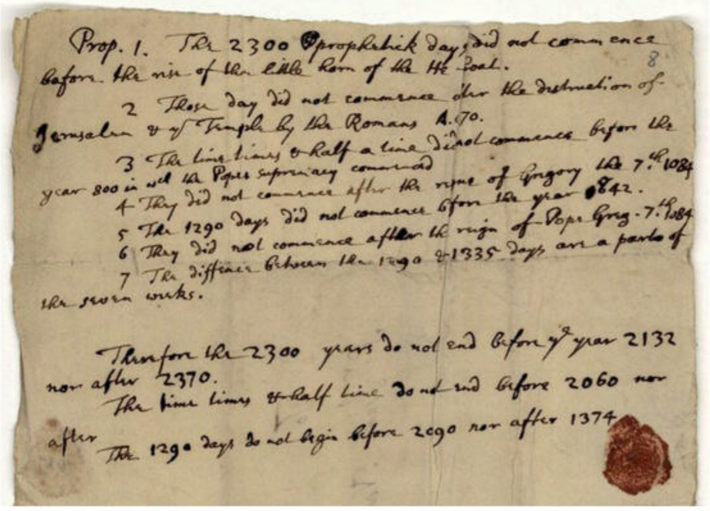
私が見た未来
完全版
たつき諒

Tatsuki released an updated “complete version” of *The Future I Saw* in 2021 in which her manga doppelgänger sees a crack opening up under the seabed between Japan and the Philippines on 5 July this year, sending ashore a massive tsunami three times the height of the one from the Tohoku earthquake. This has had a significant impact on tourism to Japan, particularly from China, but also from Thailand and Vietnam, where the prediction has been circulating on social media. The fear of an imminent earthquake has been stoked by a psychic from Okinawa in Japan, Kinjo Tamotsu, who claimed that an 8.3 magnitude earthquake would hit Tokyo on 26 April (although, clearly, this did not happen) and a prediction from popular Hong Kong feng shui master and TV personality Qi Xian Yu, known as Master Seven. She warned people to stay away from Japan from April onwards because of a coming quake, wisely avoiding committing to a particular date.

Bookings to Japan had dropped to half their usual rate

CN Yuen, who runs a travel agency in Hong Kong, said that bookings to Japan had dropped to half their usual rate, and he expected them to dip further as a result of the flurry of predictions. Oscar Chu, 36, from Hong Kong, a frequent visitor to Japan, has put future trips on hold for the moment, saying “It’s best to avoid it. It’s going to be really troublesome if an earthquake indeed happens,” while Samantha Tang, also from Hong Kong, cancelled her Japanese beach holiday saying, “Everyone says so much about an earthquake coming.”

Yoshihiro Murai, governor of Miyagi prefecture in Japan, has spoken out about the damage earthquake rumours are causing, saying, “I believe it is a serious issue when the spread of highly unscientific rumours on social media has an effect on tourism.” Asked



Prop. 1. The 2300 prophetick days did not commence
before the rise of the little horn of the He Goat. 8
2 Those day did not commence after the destruction of
Jerusalem & ye Temple by the Romans A.70.
3 The time times & half a time did not commence before the
year 800 in wch the Popes supremacy commenced
4 They did not commence after the reigne of Gregory the 7th 1084
5 The 1290 days did not commence before the year 842.
6 They did not commence after the reign of Pope Greg. 7th 1084
7 The diffence between the 1290 & 1335 days are a parts of
the seven weeks.

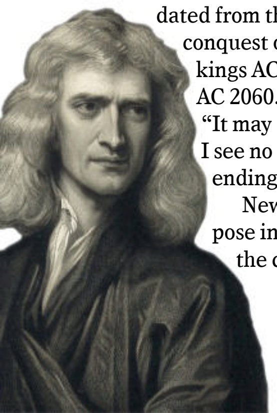
Therefore the 2300 years do not end before ye year 2132
nor after 2370.
The time times & half time do not end before 2060 nor
after
The 1290 days do not begin before 2090 nor after 1374

ABOVE: A letter from Isaac Newton (below) calculating that end of the world would most likely come in the year 2060. **BELOW RIGHT:** Contemporary prophet and self-described time traveller Elvis Thompson predicts a number of apocalyptic events for 2025, including massive storms, giant sea monsters and aliens.

about the panic that her manga was causing, Tatsuki said that she viewed it "very positively" that her work has made people more prepared for disasters, but urged them not to be "overly swayed" by her dreams and to "act appropriately based on expert opinions". *dimsumdaily.hk, 25 Apr; editions.cnn.com, 19 May 2025.*

NEWTON'S CALCULATION

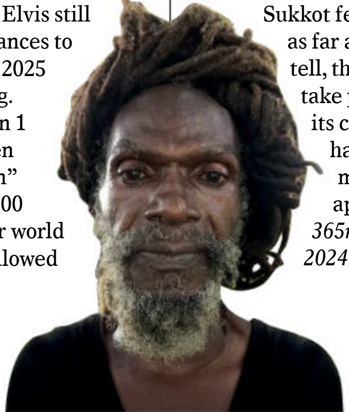
Sir Isaac Newton spent far more time studying theology than the physics and maths for which he is best known, and in 1704 he came up with his own prediction for the end of the world by interpreting dates in the Bible. Newton based his calculation on days numbered 1260, 1290 and 2300 in the *Book of Daniel* and in *Revelations,* taking them to mean years rather than days. He decided that the foundation of the Holy Roman Empire by Charlamagne in AD 800 marked the start of the abandonment of the Church, which is pivotal to these calculations, and worked out that the end would come 1260 years after this, putting his end date as 2060. Newton wrote: "And the days of short lived Beasts being put for the years of lived [sic] kingdoms, the period of 1260 days, if dated from the complete conquest of the three kings AC 800, will end AC 2060." He added: "It may end later, but I see no reason for its ending sooner."



Newton's purpose in carrying out the calculation was to refute various millennial prophets who were continually insisting that end times were upon us, saying, "This I mention not to assert when the time of the end shall be, but to put a stop to the rash conjectures of fanciful men who are frequently predicting the time of the end, and by doing so bring the sacred prophecies into discredit as often as their predictions fail." *independent.co.uk, 14 Feb 2025.*

ELVIS PREDICTS

According to the wonderfully named Elvis Thompson, we have a lot more to worry about in 2025 than Japanese earthquakes. Posting a video on Instagram, Thompson explained that he was a time traveller who had visited the future and outlined five apocalyptic events that he had discovered happened in 2025. The first was a 24-kilometre-wide tornado with wind speeds of 1,046km/h that was supposed to devastate Oklahoma on 6 April, followed by a second civil war breaking out in the US on 27 May. This was going to lead to the secession of Texas and eventually a global nuclear war that would shatter America. Although these gloomy visions have not been fulfilled, Elvis still has three more chances to make good before 2025 leaves the building. He believes that on 1 September an alien named "Champion" will transport 12,000 humans to another world for their safety, followed by a massive storm on the east coast of America on 19 September; then finally, on 3 November, a humongous sea creature named "Serene Crown", six times the size of a blue whale, will be discovered in the Pacific.



Thompson's video has had more than 26 million views, but many commenters expressed scepticism, with one saying "You went to the future got all this info, but couldn't come back with next week's lottery numbers?? Man, cut the bull!" *ndtv.com, 28 Feb 2025.*

PROPHECIES OF WAR

Last October, prominent Israeli rabbi Yitzchok Zilberstein predicted that the War of Gog and Magog would take place, in its entirety, in the three hours before dawn on 25 October, the Jewish holiday of Hoshanna Rabba. The War of Gog and Magog is prophesied in Jewish scripture as the immediate precursor of the arrival of the Messiah, the subsequent resurrection of the dead, and the end of the world. Christian commentators see it as leading to the Second Coming of Jesus. Zilberstein drew his conclusion by interpreting scriptural prophecy in the light of recent events, such as the rocket attacks on Israel by Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and Iran, and the fact that Hamas carried out its massacre of Israelis on the last day of the festival of Sukkot in 2023, plus scholarship by the 18th-century Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman and 16th-century Kabbalist Rabbi Chaim Vital. As a result, he concluded that the war would occur in the three hours before "Hanetz Hachama" (the crack of dawn) of Hoshanah Rabbah, the last day of the holiday of Sukkot in 2024. Prophecy implies the destructive War of Gog and Magog would be fought inside Israel and Zilberstein counselled that "Whoever wants to be saved should sit in the sukkah," a temporary shelter used during the Sukkot festival. However, as far as anyone can tell, the war did not take place, or if it did, its consequences have not yet made themselves apparent. *israel-365news.com, 22 Oct 2024.*

SIDELINES

UNLUCKY FOR SOME

At the start of the year, restauranteur Gordon Ramsay launched an Asian fusion restaurant named *Lucky Cat* in Bishopsgate, London. A significant feature of the décor was legions of *maneki-neko*, lucky Japanese cat sculptures with an arm raised in greeting. However, they seem to have proved irresistible to diners, with Ramsay saying "The cats are getting stolen. There were 477 stolen last week – they cost £4.50 each," putting a dent of £2,146.50 in the opening profits, assuming the allegation of mass theft wasn't a publicity stunt. *BBC News, 20 Feb 2025.*

SIGN OF THE TIMES

Thieves carried out an overnight raid on the Grade II listed St Andrew's Church in Little Steeping, Lincolnshire, in February, making off with three large religious murals in heavy wooden frames, including one reading "Thou Shalt Not Steal". *independent.co.uk, 28 Feb 2025.*

PERCEPTION OF DOORS

Sentencing Bernard Horgan, a 37-year-old man from Mallow, County Cork, for breaking into Rearden's Pub in Cork City by throwing a beer keg through the window, Judge Philip O'Leary pointed out that this had been completely unnecessary as the pub was open at the time and he could have walked in the front door. *irishexaminer.com, 27 Jan 2025.*

MAN GETS MASSIVE ERECTION

Lee Gregory got a very surprising birthday present from his wife Laura. She bought him a Grade II listed chimney in Milford near Belper in Derbyshire that had been part of one of the world's first mechanised cotton factories. Mrs Gregory paid £3,000 for it at auction and said, "I was surprised because I thought I would be in a bidding battle for it". The Gregorys' plan to turn the 4m (13ft) diameter chimney into a "quirky studio space", subject to planning permission. "Even if we don't get any conversion out of it, we are still really excited to own it," Mrs Gregory added. *BBC News, 30 Jan 2025.*

SIDELINES...

TAKE YOUR PICK

Since June 2023, the "Ice Pick Bandit" has been targeting trucks parked up at night across the south-eastern US, destroying their tyres with an ice pick. His first spree hit six trucks across several interstate highways in Florida, and he has gone on to destroy more than 1,000 tyres across Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee and Texas. The man has been caught on camera several times, and is believed to be a disgruntled former truck driver, but has not been identified. "There's no rhyme or reason for his actions," said trucker Mark Watkins, but "[Truckers would] love to catch him and put a whooping on him." *thedrive.com, 2 Feb 2025.*

COMPLETELY TRUCKED

Inspired by Elon Musk's claims, Tesla Cybertruck owner Dante Colle decided to demonstrate how bulletproof the controversial electric vehicles are. Taking his truck to a field, Colle opened fire on it with a large calibre handgun in front of an audience of friends, with the result that his £78,000 vehicle now has a sizeable hole in it. *D.Mirror, 26 Oct 2024.*

GRAVE PANIC

Police in Munich, Germany, were baffled for some weeks after more than a thousand QR code stickers appeared on grave markers at three cemeteries across the city. When scanned, they just showed the name of the grave's occupant and its location in the cemetery. Concerned that they might have a sinister purpose, police asked "people who have witnessed anybody putting the stickers on the graves... to reach out to the respective cemetery's administration". Eventually, it turned out the stickers had been applied by the cemeteries' management contractor as a means of keeping track of which graves had been cleaned. *breakingnews.ie, 19 Feb 2025.*

MARTIN ROSS

SPACE NEWS

Japanese brewers on the Moon, a new space drive on the block and more fast radio bursts

ABOVE: A promotional image for Asahi Shuzo's Moon-brewed saki. **BELOW:** British inventor Roger Shawyer and his "impossible" EmDrive.

ONE SMALL STEP ...

The high-tech Japanese sake company Asahi Shuzo is taking a bold step forward by attempting to brew its sake off-world for the first time, with the ultimate goal of being able to brew sake on the Moon. Their first step is going to be making the drink on the International Space Station (ISS), to which they are planning to send equipment and ingredients later this year. There, Japanese astronauts will recreate the gravity of the Moon's surface and start brewing. Astronaut Soichi Noguchi was excited by the prospect as it would be something that has not been done in space before, saying, "Until now, we were just taking something into space. Now they are actually going to make sake in space, which is a huge undertaking." The company intends to be ready for when a permanent Moon base is established, so that its inhabitants can have the luxury of drinking home brewed low gravity sake.

In the meantime, Asahi Shuzo will be selling the results of their ISS experiment through their Dassai sake brand with a 100ml (3.3oz) bottle of Dassai Moon going for 110 million yen (£562,000). Ambitious Asahi Shuzo president and CEO Kazuhiro Sakurai says, "It's not a case of trying it out once for the sake of publicity but rather starting with the Moon and moving on to other possibilities," adding, "I believe that sake can and must evolve – there's a significant risk of becoming fixated on the history when, with a higher quality of sake, there is potential to reach bigger markets." *scmp.com, 15 Apr 2025.*

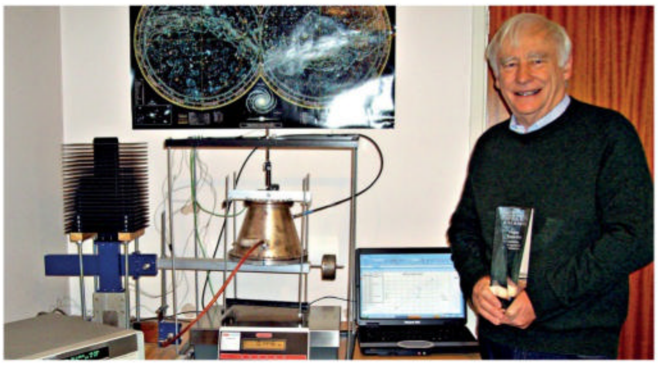
> *"Now they are actually going to make sake in space..."*

EVEN MORE IMPOSSIBLE

In 2001 electrical engineer Roger Shawyer made the bold claim that he had invented a reactionless drive for spacecraft, one that does not rely on pushing a propellant out the back to make it move forward, as described in Newton's Third Law of Motion, "every action has an equal and opposite reaction". This is the holy grail of space drives, because the major limit on what a craft can do is the amount of propellant it has to carry. Unfortunately, a reactionless drive defies Newton's Third Law by producing an action without a reaction. Shawyer's EmDrive, dubbed by others the "Impossible Drive", did initially seem credible enough for NASA and other organisation to invest time and resources in testing it. However, despite initially promising results, by 2021 it was clear that claims it could produce thrust without a propellant were illusory.

Now, though, there is a new challenger in the field of propellant-free space drives, invented by Charles Buhler, who helped establish the prestigious NASA Electrostatics and Surface Physics Laboratory and went on to co-found the space company Exodus Propulsion Technologies. At the Alternative Propulsion Energy Conference, he unveiled a novel space drive that uses electrostatics which, he says, has generated enough thrust to overcome Earth's gravity, crucial for getting a craft into space. On the face of it, this too, defies known physics, but explaining how this "New Force" drive works, Buhler says, "Essentially, what we've discovered is that systems that contain an asymmetry in either electrostatic pressure or some kind of electrostatic divergent field can give a system of a centre of mass a non-zero force component, so, what that basically means is that there's some underlying physics that can essentially place force on an object should those two constraints be met."

What this boils down to is that he believes that there's some unusual physics going on that is not yet completely understood, meaning that an electrostatic imbalance across an object can produce a force strong enough



to launch it into orbit. This "New Force" drive has yet to be subjected to wider testing, but should it prove to have more substance than the EmDrive, it could revolutionise space travel. For more on the EmDrive and other propellentless space drives, see **FT201:14, 312:12, 320:12, 332:14, 350:16, 369:14, 419:14, 441:11**). *popularmechanics.com, 29 Mar 2025.*

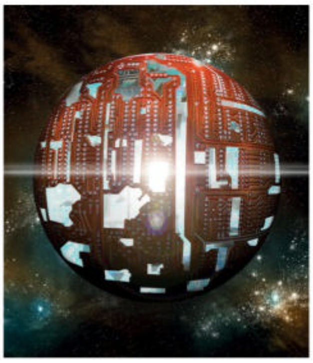
DEAD GALAXY LIVES

One of astronomy's more troubling enigmas is fast radio bursts (FRBs), immensely energetic bursts of radio waves that can release in milliseconds as much energy as the Sun radiates in a year. Various theories as to their origin have been put forward, from alien spaceship drives to colliding black holes, but in recent years opinion has tended to settle on young, highly energetic neutron stars as the source. However, a new discovery has caused astronomers to question this. The Canadian Hydrogen Intensity Mapping Experiment (CHIME) detected a repeating FRB, dubbed FRB 20240209A, which produced 21 pulses between February and July 2024 instead of flaring just once, enabling the CHIME team to pin its origin down. They found the flaring came from an old, inactive "dead" galaxy, which doesn't contain the kind of stars thought to produce FRBs. The galaxy, which is identified by co-ordinates rather than a name, is located two billion light-years from Earth and has been described as a "cosmic graveyard", filled with ancient stars close to the end of their lives. CHIME team member Wen-fai Fong says: "This new FRB shows us that just when you think you understand an astrophysical phenomenon, the Universe turns around and surprises us." *abcnews.com, 24 Jan; space.com, 25 Feb 2025.*

IT CAME FROM ALPHA CENTAURI

When interstellar objects 'Oumuamua and Comet Borisov barrelled through our Solar System on trajectories that meant they must have come from outside it, they created increased interest in objects from other star systems that reach ours. As a result, Cole Greg and Paul Wiegert from the University of Western Ontario, Canada, looked into whether material from our neighbouring star system, Alpha Centauri, could already be found in the Solar System, and how much of it there might be. As Alpha Centauri has three stars and multiple planets, it is thought to eject a considerable amount of material.

Greg and Wiegert found that it is likely that there are more than a million objects of greater than 100m diameter in our Solar System originating in Alpha Centauri, but that the majority of these are likely to be in the Oort Cloud, the ring of icy bodies at the furthest limits of the Solar System. There is only a one in a million chance of any being found within 10 astronomical units (AU) of the Sun, 1AU being equivalent to the distance from the Sun to Earth. There are, though, likely to be many smaller particles that have reached us from our neighbour, with the smallest particle likely to survive the journey being only 3.3 micrometres across. "A thorough understanding of the mechanisms by which material could be transferred from Alpha Centauri to the Solar System not only deepens our knowledge of interstellar transport but also opens new pathways for exploring the interconnectedness of stellar systems and the potential for material exchange across the Galaxy," say Greg and Weigert. *universetoday.com, 11 Feb 2025.*



LEFT: Dyson Spheres – unsustainable alien tech?.

STOCKTREK IMAGES, INC. / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

CLEANER DYSONS

In the 1960s, physicist Freeman Dyson suggested that as civilisations advanced, their living space and energy needs would grow massively, and eventually a sufficiently advanced culture might deal with this by completely enclosing their star system in a spherical shell that could be both be lived on and capture all their star's radiation. Dyson calculated that if they destroyed a planet the size of Jupiter for materials, they could build a sphere around their sun at approximately the distance of the Earth's orbit. It was later calculated that even with the star completely enclosed, a Dyson Sphere would leak infrared radiation into space, and this has been among the technosignatures scientists have been looking out for when they seek signs of alien life. There are, though, significant doubts that a Dyson sphere would be stable enough to work. Dyson himself recognised that a sphere entirely surrounding a star would be gravitationally neutral, so there would be nothing to keep it in place, meaning that eventually the sphere would crash into its star and be destroyed. Colin McInnes, an engineer at Glasgow University, has found that it is possible to build a Dyson Sphere and keep it stable, but it needs a binary star system where one star is much smaller than the other. This means that a sphere can be built around the smaller star, whose motion as it orbits around the larger one acts as an anchor to keep the sphere in place; although this also needs the small star to be less than one tenth the mass of the larger one, and the sphere itself to be very thin. Even then, it does not take into account the stresses and strains the sphere might experience in such circumstances, which could still render its construction impossible. This means that if Dyson spheres exist, they will be very rare, but it does provide clues as to where scientists should look if they want to discover one; they need to focus on large, bright stars which have a diffuse, infrared companion – the small star enclosed in a Dyson Sphere. Current thinking, though, suggests that civilisations advanced enough to build a Dyson sphere would have reined in their energy use to such an extent that they would not need to do so, having developed completely sustainable ways of generating and using energy, such that they would leave no technosignature, and would be indistinguishable from nature. *theuniversetoday.com, 6 Dec 2024; livescience.com, 12 Apr 2025.*

SIDELINES...

SLEEPING BURGLAR

A 24-year-old man was arrested in Arguellas, in Navarre, Spain, after getting into bed with an 80-year-old woman and attempting to go to sleep while burgling her flat. Released on bail, he did it again; the man and an accomplice broke into a flat in nearby Corella, but were driven off by the owner, who called police. They found the men had broken into another property, where they were discovered asleep in twin beds, their pockets full of stolen items. Police said the men "were apparently incapacitated by a large amount of alcohol or some other narcotic substance" and arrested them for breaking and entering. *D.Telegraph, 21 Aug 2024.*

UNWISE TATTOO

Mike Bohn, 44, achieved a first when he was tattooed in mid-air while skydiving. As a friend held Bohn's leg, Mo, a tattoo artist began inscribing a parachute on it during free fall, before their chutes opened over Morgan, Colorado. "We finished it on the ground, as you can't do a full tattoo in 45 seconds," said Bohn, who was very pleased with the result. Tattooist Mo added "What we did was pretty bonkers". *Sun, 23 Nov 2024.*

NEAR MISS

Police in Montebelluna, Italy, were able to help a distraught woman in her 80s after she called to tell them that she had thrown out her mattress and only afterwards remembered that she had stashed her £41,000 savings in it because she "distrusted banks". Police worked with local officials to find the mattress at the dump, and discovered the money was still safe inside. "She looked 10 years younger when she got the news," said a police spokesperson.

HISTORY IS RUBBISH

In Thessaloniki, Greece, a 32-year-old man shifting some rubbish bags next to the bins outside his flat found one to be surprisingly heavy. Opening it up, he discovered a headless and limbless statue that looked quite old, so he took it to a nearby police station. They called in an archæologist from Greece's Ephorate of Antiquities, who estimated the statue was from the Hellenistic period, between 323 and 31 BC and handed it over to the Cultural Heritage Protection Office who are seeking the person who binned the sculpture. *abcnews4.com, 25 Jan 2025.*

SIDELINES...

FLORIDA MEN

After a successful debut in 2024, The Florida Man Games have returned in 2025. Male and female teams compete to be anointed “the world’s worst superheroes”, with rounds such as the Evading Arrest Obstacle Course, Beer Belly Sumo, Hurricane Party Prep, Grocery Aisle Brawl and Human Beer Pong. Croix Bruns, 29, a winner in the weaponised pool noodle competition, said: “We’ve got the Olympics, but they don’t have gator tossing, they don’t have a contest where you’ve got to hold your beer and fight someone else at the same time.” *[AP], 2 Mar 2025.*

NICE TRY

Customs officers checking Raj Mathatu’s colourful suitcases at LAX airport in Los Angeles became suspicious when they found that the clothes inside were stiff and shed a white dust when shaken. A lab test revealed that every item, more than 32kg (70lb) of clothing, had been soaked in methamphetamine, even the cow print onesie. More than 1kg (2lb) of the drug was extracted from the clothes, bringing Mathatu’s attempt to visit Australia to a premature end. *D.Mirror, 30 Nov 2024.*

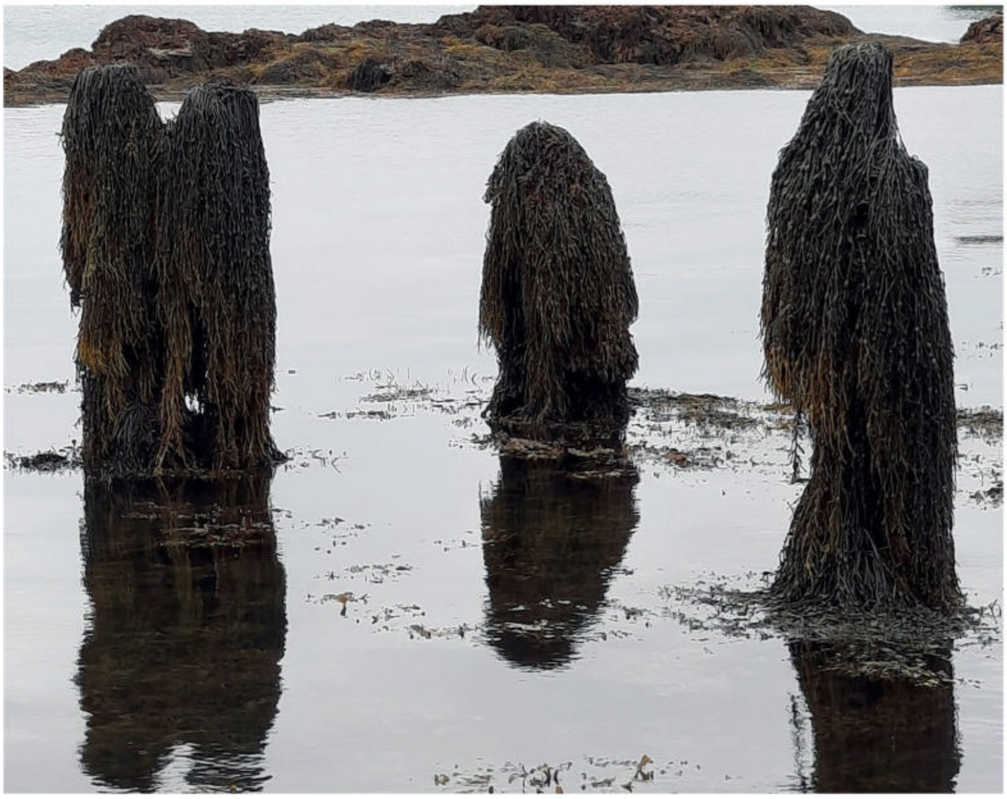
CLEARLY A THING NOW

The Peruvian National Police have a unit known as the Escuadron Verde (Green Squad) who disguise themselves in fancy dress for raids during festivals. Their latest success was a drug bust on Valentines Day, carried out by an officer disguised as a cartoon capybara. Meanwhile, in Brazil, officers have followed suit, and apprehended phone thieves at the Rio carnival while dressed as the Mighty Morphing Power Rangers, while in London, cops wore Batman and Robin costumes to sneak up on street scammers on Westminster Bridge. *BBC News, 14 Feb, editions.cnn.com, 3 Mar; independent.*

MARTIN ROSS

ISLAND ODDITIES

Anglesey seaweed ghosts and an Isle of Man mongoose on the loose



CRAIG FAIRCLOUGH / FACEBOOK

ABOVE: The “Newry Beach Ghouls”. **BELOW**: “Gef”, recaptured after nearly a month roaming free on the Isle of Man.

SEA DEVILS

Residents of Holyhead, on the island of Anglesey in Wales, are periodically spooked when low tides cause strange, human-like forms to loom over Newry Beach. Resembling Sea Devils from *Doctor Who*, they have been dubbed the “Newry Beach Ghouls” or “maritime Chewbaccas”; in fact, the creepy entities are seaweed-coated pilings, all that remains of a demolished lifeboat ramp. One visitor to the beach admitted: “I wouldn’t like to see them on a dark evening – very spooky”. *dailypost.co.uk, 30 Oct 2021.*

“I wouldn’t like to see them on a dark evening – very spooky”

GEF LIVES!

One of the strangest and most beguiling characters in the annals of forteana is Gef the Talking Mongoose, who haunted the Irving family on the Isle of Man in the 1930s, claiming to be an “extra extra clever mongoose” (**FT269:32-40, 353:34-39, 315:18-19, 436:32-35, 56-59.**). This description could very well apply to the nine-month-old yellow mongoose who managed to escape from the island’s Curraghs Wildlife Park in Ballaugh in late May. After the escape, keepers and wildlife officers “looked everywhere and there was no sight of him”, according to park manager Kathleen Graham.

CURRAGHS WILFLIFE PARK / FACEBOOK

Now nicknamed ‘Gef’, after his spooky predecessor, the mongoose managed to remain free for almost a month, with sightings all over the island. He first popped up in Union Mills, about 12 miles (20km) to the south of the wildlife park, then appeared in the National Sport Centre car park in Douglas, several miles further away, eluding attempts to capture him on both occasions.

Eventually, he was trapped on the outskirts of Douglas at the Heron and Brearley brewery in Kewaigue. Graham said mongooses could “cover distance and move very fast” if they have the motivation, adding, “I think he was highly motivated to go and find a female.” Graham described the animals as “very canny” and explained that Gef would have survived by eating “insects, small rodents, molluscs – there’s plenty of food out there for him.” Graham said that the wildlife park were “very relieved he is now safe, and he looks well!” She is now hoping to rehome Gef at another zoo, where he can find the female company he is craving. *BBC News, 16+18 Jun; iomtoday.*co.im, 17 Jun 2025.

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

312: BETTER RED THAN DEAD

"Red-headed women buck like goats" – Buck Mulligan in James Joyce, *Ulysses*

For the full story, see NR Scott, *An Esoteric History of Red Hair* (2018) – featured on YouTube. Also a massive compendium in WS Walsh, *A Handy-Book of Literary Curiosities* (1892), pp937-8.

The word ' Redhead' first appears in 1510 (OED).

According to Wikipedia, red or ginger hair occurs in about two per cent of the human race, especially common in Northern European peoples.

Greek and Roman authors recognised this, e.g. Herodotus (bk4 ch10 para8) and Livy (bk38 ch17 para4). The former, writing about the Budini, appends the fortean titbit that among them live strange box-like creatures whose testicles they used to cure uterine diseases.

Similar comments were made by Seneca and Tacitus, the latter in his *Agricola* taking note of the Caledonians, apparently full of ancient Rob Roys; Scottish King Alexander II was ridiculed for his rufous locks by King John, a colour also sported by Mad MacAdder in the TV comedy. Architectural writer Vitruvius explained this as the result of a cold, damp climate.

Ridiculing anthropomorphic religion, pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes gibed that the Thracians (roughly = Bulgarians) invent gods with red hair and snub noses, these being their own characteristics.

Suetonius says that when Caligula paraded fake German prisoners-of-war, he took care to have their hair dyed red.

Tacitus (*Histories*, bk4 ch61) records that rebel Julius Civilis, "fulfilling a vow popular with barbarians, dyed his hair red." One modern example was American comedienne Lucille Ball.

Homeric heroes Achilles and Menelaus were gingers, as was traditional founder-king of Athens, Theseus. So, too, by name was the villainous Pyrrhus, actually Neoptolemus, son of Achilles. Equivalent name in Rome was Rufus (whence William Rufus and adjective 'rufous'), a notably common cognomen.

Most memorable ruddy Roman was emperor Nero, commonly dubbed 'Ahenobarbus' (Bronze-Beard), especially in popular insults. Hence Peter Ustinov's rufous-tinged whiskers in *Quo Vadis?* Suetonius began his biography with a rigmarole about the family ancestor Domitius who, returning to announce a victory at Rome, was met by two young men who, to show they were superhuman, stroked his beard which promptly changed from black to red – Never Say Dye...

Was Jesus a Ginger? A thus-titled website essay adduces the Rabbula Gospels, the fake Letter of Lentulus, and Islamic texts (Quran included) to show he was ruddy and freckled. See also Ayla Stewart's online 'Red Heads in the Bible'. However, as I showed in *Ævum* 58 (1984), 144-8, Byzantine painters followed an artistic instructional manual depicting him as 'wheaten' in mien, with curly, black hair.

However, at spectrum opposite, Pauli Franklin Baum, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 21 (1922), 520-9, marshals convincing evidence that Judas Iscariot was a ginger. Although (see below) there were many classical precedents, this helped red-heads acquire a dubious reputation over the centuries, for easy example from Shakespeare's Shylock to Dickens's Fagin.

Aristotle (?) (*Physiognomy* 812ab) claims "red-heads are of bad character". He is also often credited with the further accusation that they are emotionally un-housebroken, but it seems impossible to verify any such text.

Aristotle (?), *Problems*, bk38 para2), further claims that fishermen, divers, and sea-going workers generally are red-haired, linking this (as did Vitruvius above) with their aqueous environment.

Diodorus Siculus (bk1 ch70) asserts it was lawful to execute redheads in Egypt, albeit (contrary to rival assertions) they were rare in that country, because of the evil deeds of ancestral copper-nob Typhon.

A snatch of dialogue in Terence's play *Self-Tormentor* (Act5 scene5 vv15-6) runs:

Sostrata: My son, I'll arrange for you to marry our neighbour's daughter.

Clitipho: What, that red-haired, freckle-faced girl? I really can't!

Also, this disobliging epigram (bk12. 54) by Martial:

Zoilus, with your red hair, short foot and bleary-eye, it would be a miracle if you were good.

Clitipho stands in direct opposition to Peanuts protagonist Charlie Brown who forever hankered after the Little Red-Headed Girl at school (never seen in the strip).

Redheads, especially women, are modernly credited with fiery temperaments (think Maureen O'Hara) and randiness, this latter trait (surely a virtue) going back at least to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

An impressive charge-sheet developed over the centuries. *The Calendar of Compost and Shepherds* (translated from the French, 1508) avers: "Those that have red hair be commonly ireful, and lack wit, and be of little truth." In mediæval England, they were routinely accused of being vampires, werewolves, or witches, whilst in Spain the Inquisition branded them all Jews, exploiting Judas's rufous image.

Many websites enumerate illustrious redheads in fact and fiction. British heroes/heroines range from Boudicca/Boadicea (said by Dio Cassius, bk62 ch2, to have had "a great mane of red hair") to Richard the Lion-Heart and Henry II down through Elizabeth I to the youthful Winston Churchill, nicknamed 'Coppertop' at school. Perhaps surprising that Mrs Thatcher who travelled from brown to blonde to brunette to platinum did not adopt this right royal hue.

Other end of the political spectrum discloses fiery Labour minister (Attlee's 1945-50 government) Ellen Wilkinson (on whom I have written outside *FT*), proud to be known as 'Red Ellen', suiting both her tresses and politics.

Must end with *Daily Express* humourist, JB Morton, the long-running 'Beachcomber', whose memorable characters included the recurrent Twelve Red-Bearded Dwarfs, inspiring the neologism 'Rufonanitis' = Irrational Fear of Red-Bearded Dwarfs. A perpetual nuisance to Mr Justice Cockle-Carrot, they might have been modelled on Conan Doyle's *The Red-Headed League* (1891), and just conceivably on the Red-Headed Bandits of Mawddach who terrorised Wales in the 16th century.

"When red-headed people are above a certain social grade their hair is auburn" – Mark Twain

Going viral

DAVID HAMBLING says that the ascent of the Covid lab leak theory is about politics, not science

In April 2025, the White House website officially pronounced that COVID-19 originated from a laboratory in Wuhan, China. Once dismissed as an unfounded conspiracy theory, the lab leak hypothesis is now arguably the dominant narrative, ahead of the rival theory that the virus spread from a market where illegal animal meat was sold. Is this a triumph for the truth-seeking scientific process which weeds out falsehoods and corrects itself, or something else entirely?

The lab leak theory originally emerged from conspiracy sites like 4Chan and Infowars. Variants included the suggestion that it was a biological weapon released deliberately. The theory died out in late 2020, but was resurrected in an August 2021 report from the Republican members of the US House Foreign Affairs Committee. This was based on Chinese sources and was heavily criticised for mistranslations and misinterpretations. But it reignited media interest and since then the two theories have been battling it out in the public domain.

The White House statement follows a new CIA assessment that the virus was "more likely" to have leaked from a Chinese lab than to have come from animals. A statement from the world's best-funded intelligence agency ought to mean something, but there were caveats. One was that the agency had "low confidence" in the assessment, and that the supporting intelligence was "deficient, inconclusive or contradictory". Another was that the assessment was not based on new evidence, but a re-evaluation of existing data.

John Ratcliffe, the CIA's new, Trump-appointed director, may have had something to do with this. In an earlier interview with Breitbart News, Ratcliffe talked about how he intended to handle China: "One of the things that I've talked about a lot is addressing the threat from China," said Ratcliffe. "That goes back to why a million Americans died and why the Central Intelligence Agency has been sitting on the sidelines for five years in not making an assessment about the origins of Covid."

Unsurprisingly, when forced to make a choice the CIA sided with Ratcliffe, making China a bad actor, a rogue state carrying out dangerous biological experiments and covering up the evidence.

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After the SARS outbreak, the Chinese Government pledged to crack down on illegal markets

China's continued lack of transparency has been one of the biggest arguments in favour of the lab leak theory. At the start of the pandemic, the Chinese Government silenced Chinese medical professionals trying to speak up, and delayed releasing critical information to the WHO. Later they hindered investigators attempting to pin down the exact origin of the virus (see **FT395:6-7, 403:7, 407:20, 408:6-7, 431:26**). This suggests guilt: an innocent government would have nothing to hide.

But they did have something to hide. After the SARS outbreak of 2002/2003 (**FT172:32-37**), which was linked to the live animal trade, the Chinese government pledged to crack down on illegal markets selling wild animals. Much of this trade is carried out by a "black-red alliance" of criminal gangs working with officials in the Chinese Communist Party. This apparently included the market in Wuhan. No great surprise that the authorities lied about the wild animals at the market, disposed of animal bodies without testing, and ordered Chinese researchers not to promote the market theory.

So the secrecy angle could support both the lab leak and animal crossover theories.

A second piece of evidence was the emergence of the virus in a city which happened to have a coronavirus laboratory. To conspiracy theorists, this looks like a smoking gun, but the statistics are surprising. Philipp Markolin, author of *Lab Leak Fever*, says that eight out of 10 large Chinese cities had coronavirus labs, and some of them had several such facilities. It would be more surprising if no lab was present.

Another piece of evidence which figured in the original furore was work in Wuhan by Dr Shi Zhengli on gain-of-function by coronaviruses. However, it later became clear that these experiments did not involve complete viruses, just synthesised genetic sequences which were not capable of replication. Whatever causes the pandemic did not come from his lab.

Some claims of anomalous 'cleavage sites' on the virus, supposed signatures of genetic engineering, were soon dismissed by virologists.

Meanwhile scientists have been investigating the matter forensically by following a trail of molecular footprints. This is possible because sarbecoviruses like COVID-19 evolve by recombination. When two viruses infect the same cell, they can get blended together. As a result, new versions are a patchwork of previously seen viruses. As with human genetics, this allows their heritage to be traced and the evidence shows that the virus recombined inside different hosts including bats and pangolins.

The tracking is getting more precise in pinning down the source. A study published in May by the University of California San Diego (UCSD), showed that Covid-19 travelled a similar route to SARS, taking several years to move from western China or northern Laos to Wuhan. This matches the familiar known pattern of diseases following the wildlife meat trade. "We see this pattern repeatedly: humans in contact with animals and the pathogens circulating among them, leading to spillovers," says UCSD researcher Jonathan Pekar.

While there are still debates around the edges of the topic, the scientific community has overwhelmingly rejected the lab leak theory. This is because of the abundant, convincing evidence of a 'zoonotic'(animal) origin. There is no direct evidence for the alternative. In August 2024 the *Lancet Microbe* went so far as to state in an editorial that it was "simply wrong" to assert that COVID-19 was of unnatural origin, and that promotion of the lab leak theory was politically motivated.

While the animal spillover theory has testable implications, like the patchwork ancestry of the virus, there is no direct way of proving the lab leak theory. Without leaked documentation or a whistleblower we will never know.

It is clear why the US administration might favour the lab leak theory for political reasons. But the science is another matter.

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Half-bodied ghosts

ALAN MURDIE finds himself in a strange world of ghostly trousers and phantom floating torsos

In a field as crowded as the paranormal book market, it is difficult to come up with a work which stands out. But it seems quite likely that comedienne and actress Daisy May Cooper has achieved this with *Hexy Bitch: Tales from My Life, the Afterlife and Beyond* (2024) by packing in more swear words than any other paranormal book to which I have been exposed.

Left struggling for words to convey her amazement or fraught reactions when confronted by manifestations she is frequently driven to express herself with expletives.

Now this could be indicative of the limitations of language in the face of indescribable and baffling phenomena. Alternatively, and being charitable, maybe Daisy May Cooper is particularly in touch with her unconscious mind, within which may lurk all kinds of suppressed expressions and feelings that might, at certain points, emerge forcefully. Hence some outpourings that might match the Enfield Poltergeist 'voice' at full throttle (Guy Playfair at the end of his 1980 study *This House is Haunted* raised the possibility of Tourette's syndrome). Some poltergeists have a tendency for graphic and uninhibited language, like certain unprintable and coarser utterances attributed to 'Gef the Talking Mongoose'. Indeed, at one point, I wondered if Ms Cooper was channelling Peter Cook and Dudley Moore in full *Derek and Clive* mode, but since that profane pair once contemplated creating a satirical film denouncing Spiritualism as quackery, I think it unlikely (see *Psychic News*, 18 May 1968).

It's a shame, since casual cursing within a text frequently becomes tiresome for the reader and is a distraction from some singular and interesting ghostly experiences described. But her reactions may be excused by her convincing account of how when relaxing early one evening at home with her young son she witnessed two disembodied legs, topped by white gym shorts running across the room. Her use of expletives is at least understandable as she attempts to process this vision.

Cases of body parts – severed arms, hands and heads and phantoms cut off at the knees or waist recur in folklore and reports from psychical research. A choice example was a partly dismembered smuggler, hacked to death by cronies at Happisburgh in Norfolk in the 18th century. Thereafter the apparition of his legless torso and his head dangling down his back, attached by a thin strip of skin, floated round the village until his remains were discovered.

DAISY MAY COOPER
Hexy B✯tch
TALES FROM MY LIFE, THE AFTERLIFE AND BEYOND

LEFT: Might Daisy May Cooper's *Hexy Bitch* be the sweariest paranormal book yet written?

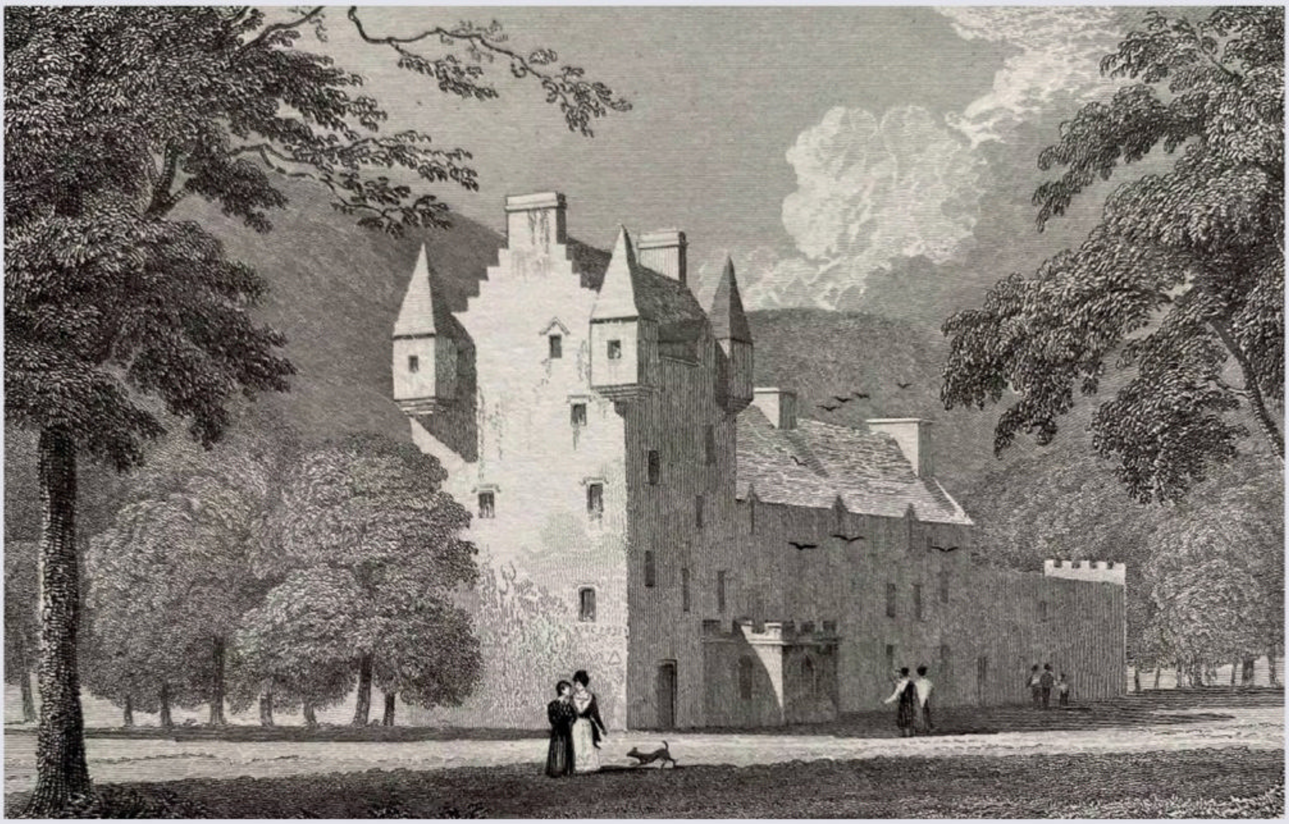
Simons was forced painfully awake by a burning sensation like a fiery kiss on his cheek

Andrew Green recorded sightings of ghostly pairs of trousers with no upper body visible; and in Iceland, which abounds with ghostly appearances, Erlendur Haraldsson recorded in *The Departed Amongst the Living* (2012) how "in about a fifth of accounts… only a part of the body is seen."

Undoubtedly, one of the most gruesome of British cases of a partly formed phantom is the story of the murdered wife of Meggernie Castle in Glen Lyon, Perthshire. The castle was built around 1585 by 'Mad' Colin Campbell, and it was a later laird, the paranoid Menzies of Culdare, who allegedly murdered his beautiful wife because of groundless fears she might turn to another man. Though neither her demeanour or conduct supplied the slightest grounds for such suspicion, he became utterly delusional and beat her to death in a demented rage. Lucidity returning, Menzies immediately grasped the need to conceal the crime and proceeded to cleave his wife's body in two, hiding the parts in a cupboard. Sealing the cupboard, he then set off on a lengthy trip around Europe lasting a year. On his return, he claimed his wife had tragically drowned while boating in Italy. This story was readily accepted; these were unstable times, communications were limited, life expectancy was often short, sudden deaths were far from uncommon and health and safety awareness lay far in the distant future.

Nonetheless, it dawned upon Menzies that olfactory escapes from the mouldering body, still hidden away, might eventually betray his crime. Accordingly, he resolved to dispose separately of the two halves. Under cover of darkness, he surreptitiously dug a grave in the churchyard before hastening back home. Prising open the cupboard for the first time in a year and fighting off nausea, he removed the lower portion of the body and the legs and bore them away to the pre-prepared grave in the churchyard. The next night he tried removing the torso, but his nerves failed and he hid it under the floorboards. He then suffered a fatal heart attack, though one version claims a mysterious figure appeared and killed him (though how this is known in the absence of any direct witness is unclear). Thereafter, tales spread of Meggernie Castle being haunted by the upper half of the lady, while the graveyard was prowled by her lower portion.

Were the backstory not so horrific, such a notion might seem almost comic, like the Lunarians with detachable and independently animated body parts in von Raspe's *Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. As for actual sightings, two are given in nerve-tingling detail in the book *Phantom Footsteps* (1959) by Alasdair Alpin MacGregor, describing the experiences of EJ Simons and Beaumont



ABOVE: Meggernie Castle, Perthshire, scene of an 1862 apparitional encounter with a gruesome backstory of murder and dismemberment.

Fetherstone who stayed at the castle as guests of its owner, Henry Wood, in 1862.

The two men occupied adjoining tower rooms that shared parts of a long-sealed-up cupboard. One night, Simons was forced painfully awake by a burning sensation like a fiery kiss on his cheek. He then saw the upper half of a woman gliding towards the door. Leaping from his bed, he found no one, and his door was still locked. Looking in the mirror – presumably having lit a candle or lamp by this stage – a scan of his face revealed nothing. Meanwhile, Fetherstone awoke to find the room bathed in a pink light and a woman apparently moving near the blocked cupboard before vanishing. Both men called out to one another and hastily convened a fraught discussion. However, they resolved not to share the precise details, but immediately to write down separate accounts which they would present to their host Mr Wood in the morning.

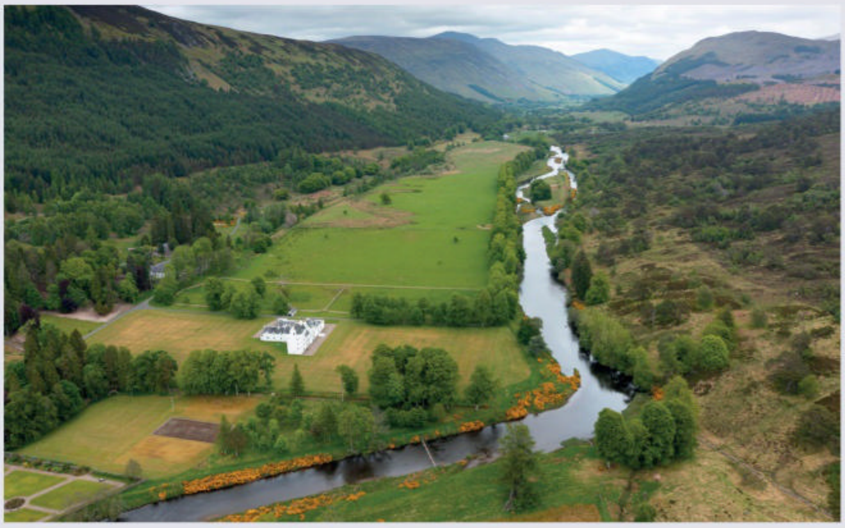
For the critical writer Eric Russell, in *Ghosts* (1970), this detail was the stamp of fiction, invented to enhance the credibility of the story. However, I would not necessarily discredit everything on this basis. Rather, such a step might be wholly consistent with men who feared they might have been placed in a compromising position and potentially at risk of legal proceedings.

Let's remember this was 1862, a time when segregation of the sexes was routine in most social situations, certainly in middle-and-upper class circles. Mixed company was often deemed only proper if family members, chaperones or guardians were also present, guaranteeing protection for any lady. In polite society, such segregation was even more rigid after dark. No respectable married or unmarried woman would dream of venturing uninvited into the bedrooms of single men. Spending any time alone with a man, so deep into the night, would carry the risk of scandal if exposed.

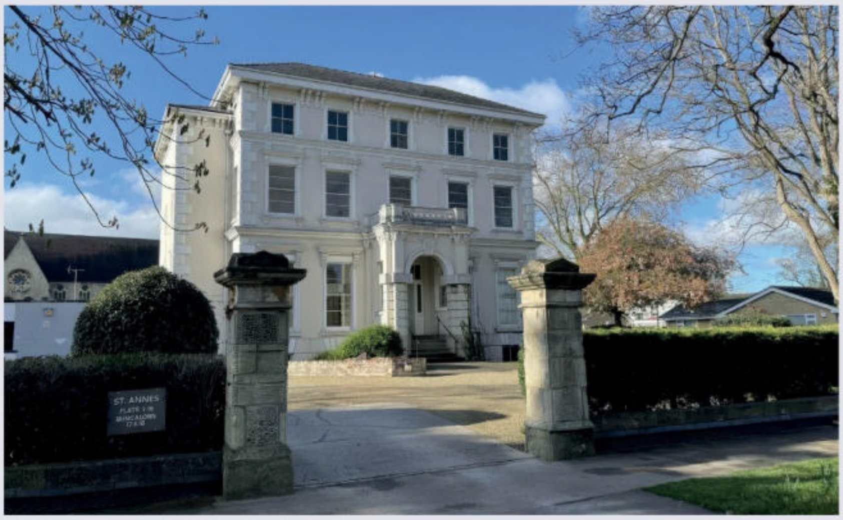
Indeed, just a few years earlier, evidence of such a meeting could land the man in court facing a claim for damages from an aggrieved husband suing for compensation for acts of adultery committed with his wife (an action called 'criminal conversation' based upon the notion that adultery violated a husband's legal right of exclusive sexual intercourse with his spouse). Actions for criminal conversation were abolished by the Matrimonial Causes Act 1857, which established the Divorce Court to grant a more efficacious and less emotive remedy. But reform failed to dissolve the contemporary stigma and obloquy attaching to any gentleman cited in a Victorian divorce suit (see *The Victorian Bar*, 1982, by JR Lewis).

Against this background, the actions of Simons and Fetherstone are not as unreasonable or improbable as may appear to modern audiences. Having jointly experienced an uninvited intrusion by a strange woman who planted a kiss on one of them, both men might have feared embroilment in scandal or felt vulnerable to blackmail. Given this context, one may conceive them agreeing, "Let's not say anything about this now, but write it down. Then we will go together in the morning and explain everything to Wood," with their independent notes designed as a safeguard against entrapment or potential litigation.

Fetherstone and Simons duly related all to Herbert Wood the next day. Wood then revealed they had encountered the ghost which roamed both the Castle and the nearby graveyard. Mrs Wood was told and she insisted they did not speak of it further to prevent alarming the servants.



IAIN MASTERTON / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



TOP: An aerial view of Meggernie Castle today. **ABOVE**: The Cheltenham house that was home to the famous 'Morton Ghost', a weeping lady in black whose face was veiled by a handkerchief.

At Meggernie Castle the ghost appeared again one week later to Simons as he sat writing letters in the library. Despite a roaring fire, the room became incredibly cold and Simons looked up to see the heavy library door opening by itself and revealing the upper half of the ghost drifting along the corridor. Marshalling all his reserves of courage, Simons set off down the same long corridor back to his room. Passing the corridor's only window, he glimpsed the beautiful, sad face of the ghost peering in.

Obviously, the possibility of a straying spouse, flirtatious daughter or wanton maidservant cannot be eliminated. In *Hauntings* (1977) Peter Underwood proposed the famous 'Morton Ghost' – a weeping lady in black who concealed her face – repeatedly seen by the family and staff of a Captain and Mrs Despard in their house in Cheltenham between 1882 and 1889 was really a living woman, the secret mistress of the Captain.

However, Underwood in his *Gazetteer of Scottish Ghosts* (1973) considers the Meggernie manifestations credible. He states how the wife of a "General Kinloch Grant" awoke in the tower bedroom to find the ghost leaning over her. If true, this witness was probably Agnes, the wife of Colonel Kinloch Grant (1807-1894) who served as the first Inspector of Constabulary for Scotland. Mrs Grant seemingly took this in her stride; she reputedly enjoyed spending time in tranquil graveyards (not necessarily an eccentric or morbid trait it might be said) and was wholly unable to comprehend why local people shunned their kirkyard after nightfall.

Some 60 years later the ghost appeared again. One night in October 1928 a Dr Kay Cameron was called to the castle at 11pm. Given the lateness of the hour, he was invited to stay the night and make the long journey home in the morning. Interviewed by Alasdair Alpin MacGregor in 1958, Dr Cameron recalled staying in a tower room and how during the night he was awoken by footsteps approaching his door. No knock followed, but someone seemed nonetheless to have entered his room. Looking up, he saw the upper half of a woman gliding at ceiling height and then vanishing.

At breakfast, he demanded to know why he was accommodated in the haunted room. His hosts assured him that his room was below the haunted chamber. The floors had been raised, but the ghost was following the original level. This idea seemed to have originated at Trinity College, Oxford, in the 1890s when a ghost was reported walking knee-deep across the library floor, apparently adhering to an earlier and lower floor level (see *Historic British Ghosts*, 1936, by Philip W Sergeant). Not to be outdone, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, has a similarly shortened spectre of a proctor who wades knee-deep along a corridor (in *Haunted East Anglia*, 1974, by Joan Forman).

Stories of bisected ghosts don't come much grimmer than the murdered wife of Meggernie (I know one exceeding it in ghastliness published nearly a century ago, but we needn't visit it here). Could the truth behind the severed Meggernie ghost lie not in a foul crime but merely a raised floor, with the story of the murdered wife invented to 'explain' it afterwards? In contrast to sightings at the castle, no named witnesses have emerged to the severed legs and lower half parading around the churchyard. But 'The mystery of the raised floor' can hardly compete with 'The Scottish castle haunted by two halves of a butchered wife' (*The Scotsman*, 31 Oct 2023)

Such a parsimonious explanation might boost ideas about ghosts being some kind of recording, impressed upon the physical environment – the so-called 'stone tape' theory. Unfortunately, just how exactly such a mechanism might work is opaque since there is no evidence of stone acting like a tape or video recorder. The problem of partly-formed ghosts dropping in from eternity is just one aspect of the wider mystery of apparitions in general. If the study of ghosts is ever to gain the vantage ground in science and psychology such partial appearances will need an explanation as much as complete phantasms, even if requiring the contemplation of some curious and disturbing stories.

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

The Government says it wants to block out the Sun; what could possibly go wrong, ask geo-engineering protestors, while **NOEL ROONEY** wonders if chemtrails can come in from the cold...

UNHAPPY TRAILS

Last weekend, there was a decently-sized demonstration in London that largely passed under the radar of mainstream news media. The reason for the omission may well have been the topic of the protest. Ostensibly it was a demonstration against geo-engineering, and in particular the – frankly peculiar – attempts suggested by scientists to control the weather by means of cloud modification.

But the word on everyone's lips (and many of the posters, and a lot of T-shirts) was chemtrails. These hardy perennials of the C-sphere have had a rather spotted history. When I first began to observe the world of conspiracy, chemtrails were right out there, along with flat earth and lizard people. Flat earth and the lizards have stayed out there, but chemtrails, if they've not gone mainstream, have at least gained a measure of respectability.

Partly, this is to do with climate change, a theory that, in the Conspirasphere, is usually prefaced with the word 'conspiracy'. The lunatic green shills of the WEF (climate activists in common parlance) have enabled the sinister schemes of TPTB, to wit, spraying all manner of toxic chemicals on clouds, on trees, and on us. This is not, for conspiracists, a good thing.

Weather engineering is not new. In the mid-19th century, American scientists experimented with firing cannons at clouds to produce rain. The results were somewhat mixed; which is to say, the weather usually won. Nevertheless, the idea caught on, and since that time a whole range of activities, some of them merely eccentric, some decidedly batty, have been propagated in the skies.

A whole range of activities have been propogated in the skies

It's hardly unreasonable to ask if this kind of 'suck it and see' approach to saving the world is entirely appropriate. For some, this writer included, any form of scientific activity that starts with someone chortling 'what if' is probably suspect. But for the C-sphere, it amounts to something altogether more sinister; not just dangerously scatty, but intentionally dangerous, if not lethal.

This, however, is the first time that the anti-chemtrail movement has – as far as I'm aware – managed something as high-profile as a well-attended public demo in the UK. In part, it may have been galvanised by the appointment of Robert Kennedy Junior (a man familiar with conspiracies and theories about them) to high office in the Trump administration. Kennedy has spoken openly about geo-engineering and chemtrails (he has actually used the word on national TV) and this has certainly had a liberating effect on many conspiracists.

The Trump government has definitely had a different attitude to conspiracy theory from its predecessors. How could it not? The Donald is famous for averring that 'global warming' (he's a traditionalist in that respect) is in fact a Chinese plot to undermine the American automobile industry. Climate change research – and, one might argue, ultimately its influence – has taken a hammering in his second term: the one where he actually decided to do stuff.

Whether an expression of public concern will affect government policy in this area is highly moot. More to the point, it will be fascinating to see if this attempt to sneak chemtrails in under the geo-engineering umbrella will provoke a wider examination of the phenomenon. Researchers have been working for years to investigate the contents of the sinister trails, usually without funding, and often without any scientific ability. It would be curious to find their work being taken up by people with more acumen but a different take on the problem.

And it would be ironic if climate activists took against geo-engineering and thus made chemtrails fully respectable. This is entirely possible. There is a part of the climate change world that is distrustful of expertise; too many politicians have claimed to be 'following the science' in recent years when it was apparent they were doing anything but. And now that scientists are saying that extreme weather is not increasing, while every activist and journalist is saying the opposite, following the science may take on a connotation of predator and prey rather than guru and gullible.

Those readers old enough to remember a musical called *Hair* (the contemporary equivalent would likely be called *Botox*) are no doubt familiar with the idea of the Age of Aquarius. This age of sweetness and light (and hair, obviously) is usually promoted as the antidote to the evils of late Pisces. But what if (there, now I've done it) the Aquarian future was not quite as advertised?

From Crowley onwards, a steady, if small, stream of writers and thinkers has suggested that, where Pisces was the age of religion and government, Aquarius may be the age of the uncaring individual and chaos. Crowley's age of Horus is only the first of these counter-arguments; scholars given to syncretism have long included the Kali Yuga in their theories. But the kicker, for many concerned with this particular New Age (as opposed to the cotton candy version promoted on conspirituality platforms), is that proponents of the NWO are allegedly very keen on things Aquarian.

I don't recall hearing Yuval Harari (the duty WEF guru) using the term explicitly, but I haven't listened that hard; Harari is the master of the sweeping generalisation, a form of argument I find at best soporific. But plenty of commentators in the C-sphere claim that the Illuminati are keen New Agers. They may be assuming some equivalence between New Age and New World Order, of course.

We live in an age when the future has never seemed so close; it can seem that we hardly have time to live in the present. Such enthusiasm may be curbed somewhat, if every version of tomorrow is a toxic picture of dark skies ahead.

https://expose-news.com/2025/06/23/thousands-join-anti-geoengineering-protest-in-london/

https://vigilantcitizen.com/vc-resources/the-age-of-aquarius-a-key-to-understanding-the-occult-elites-mindset/

SEX AND DRUGS AND...

Dublin boob wars, a record-breaking penis and the isolated Brazilian tribe suing the *New York Times*

PA IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

TOM HONAN

ABOVE LEFT: A tourist helps himself to a double handful of Molly Malone's ample bosom. **ABOVE RIGHT**: This is just the sort of behaviour that student Tilly Cripwell is determined to put an end to. **BELOW**: Are the inhabitants of Ringaskiddy in Ireland really in a state of constant arousal thanks to Pfizer fumes?

BRONZE BOOB BATTLE

For 37 years Dublin has been graced by a statue of Molly Malone, the heroine of a folk song about a Dublin seafood vendor, created by the renowned bronze sculptor Jeanne Rynhart. The statue gives Malone a revealing cleavage, and over time a tradition has grown up that if you rub her breasts it will bring good luck. As a result, they are now a very different colour to the rest of the statue – a bright gold as opposed to the dark brown patina elsewhere.

Now, Trinity College student Tilly Cripwell has started a campaign to put an end to visitors "violating" the statue by groping it, condemning this as "disgusting behaviour". "It triggered me so much, I just had to put a stop to it," Cripwell said, adding that Malone is "one of the few representations of women in Irish culture", but has been "reduced to her breasts", which "sets a really bad example to younger generations." Cripwell wants tourist companies to "actively deter" customers from fondling the statue to prevent further damage, and is campaigning for the council to repatinate Malone's boobs. She also wants the statue mounted on a higher plinth where gropers can no longer reach her, pointing out that the statues of male figures in Dublin "are all on high platforms reflecting their status".

Molly Malone is not the only statue to receive such attentions; the tomb of murdered 19th century journalist Victor Noir in Paris's Pere Lachaise Cemetery has an ultrarealistic life-size bronze of his body lying on top, which is somewhat more "masculine" than most memorials. As a result, a tradition of women rubbing the very obvious bulge in his trousers to guarantee fertility has developed, so that it too is a very different colour to the rest of the statue. *BBC News, 18 Mar 2025.*

SOMETHING IN THE AIR

Since 1998, the pharmaceuticals company Pfizer has manufactured almost all the world's supply of the erectile disfunction drug Viagra at its plant in Ringaskiddy, Ireland. However, fumes from the plant have reportedly had unexpected side effects on the local population. "One whiff and you're stiff," explained a local bartender, and others have claimed that male dogs in the town go about in an almost constant state of arousal, which they attribute to compounds emitted by the plant that then leach into the water supply. Allegedly, many people visit the town to experience these benefits, then never leave, with a local woman quoted as saying: "We've been getting the love fumes for years now for free."

Pfizer, however, deny they are responsible, saying, "Our manufacturing processes have always been highly sophisticated as well as highly regulated," dismissing the tales as "an amusing myth." *pharmaceuticalprocessingworld.com, 7 Dec 2017.*

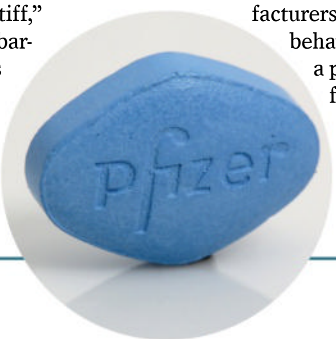
HIGH RISK

Patients taking dopamine inhibiting drugs to treat restless leg syndrome, a common affliction that gives people an irresistible urge to move their legs when resting, have complained that doctors have not given them sufficient warning that the drugs can cause them to seek out risky sexual behaviour. While manufacturers mention such a behavioural change as a possible side effect in the leaflet that comes with the drug, it is easy to miss. This led to one woman compulsively going out in a see-through top to cruise for sex in risky locations, and another to sell used underwear and videos of sex acts online, as well as having frequent phone sex with strangers, while a 45-year-old man found he was driven to "uncontrolled acts of exhibitionism and indecent behaviour" when prescribed the drugs.

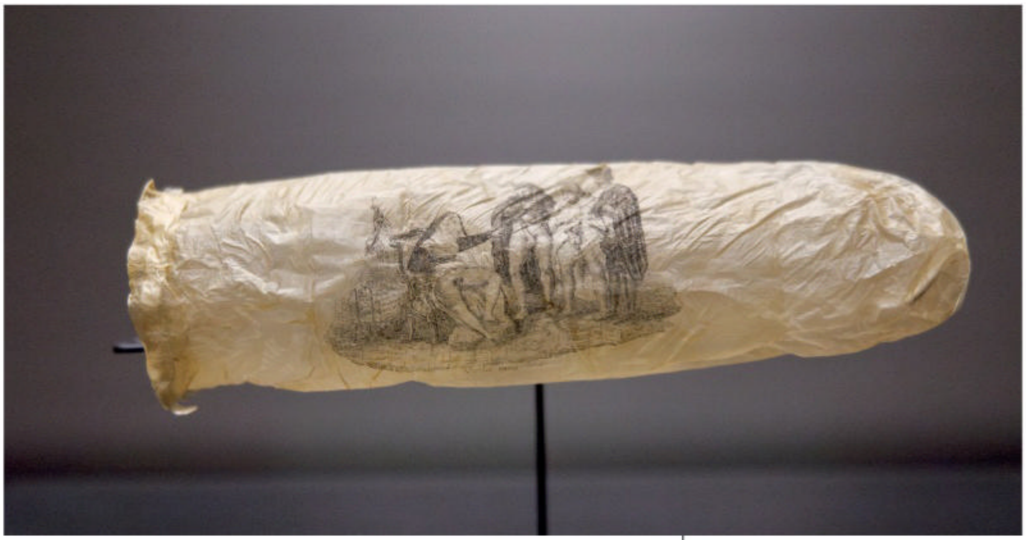
Use of dopamine agonists has also been linked to compulsive gambling and animal abuse. Researchers say these drugs over-stimulate the feeling of excitement around risky behaviours but under-stimulate the appreciation of consequences, leading to potentially dangerous results. In every case, though, the risky behaviour stopped when the patients came off the drugs. *BBC News, 11 Mar 2025.*

MARUBO PORN NIGHTMARE

The Marubo, an Indigenous community of about 2,000 people living on the Amazon in Brazil, are suing the *New York Times* after the paper claimed that access to the Internet via Elon Musk's Starlink system had turned the whole community into porn addicts. They were seeking at least $180m in damages after the paper portrayed them as "unable to handle basic exposure



to the Internet” and claimed “that their youth had become consumed by pornography”. The *NYT* also claimed that the new net connection resulted in teens playing “violent video games” and “minors watching pornography”, and that it led to “more aggressive sexual behaviour” from young men. Community leader Enoque Marubo said the story had created “a global media storm”, that resulted in “more than 100 websites around the world publishing headlines that falsely claim the Marubo have become addicted to porn” and that this had led to “humiliation, harassment and irreparable harm to their reputations and safety”. The *NYT* denied the allegations and promised to “vigorously defend against the lawsuit.” *BBC News, 23 May 2025.*



RIJKSMUSEUM AMSTERDAM

ABOVE: The Rijksmuseum’s newly acquired vintage condom, bearing an erotic image. **LEFT**: Marubo leaders insist that Internet access has not turned their youths into porn addicts. **BELOW LEFT**: Matt Barr, the not always happy owner of a terrifyingly large member.

BIGGUS DICKUS

Porn may insist that when it comes to penises, bigger is better, but that is not the experience of Matt Barr, who has the “world’s biggest medically verified penis”. His member comes in at 14 inches long (35.6cm) with a girth of 8.5 inches (21.6cm), compared to the average size of an adult penis which is 3 to 4in (7.6 to 10.2cm) when flaccid, and between 6 to 7in (15.3 to 17.8cm) when erect. Barr, 40, admits that he has always had problems having sex as the average vagina is just too small for him to fit in, explaining that it took some time before he managed to have successful penetrative sex, and when he did, it didn’t go well.

“It was not good, I went to hospital, so not ideal,”, he said, without revealing the details; since then, he’s been careful “to ensure that doesn’t happen again”. It has also caused him problems with relationships, “It’s difficult, because it’s not something you really spring on people as a surprise, because it just does scare people away,” he says, admitting that swinging his dick once left a girl with concussion. It has also meant he got thrown out of a yoga class and kicked out of a hotel pool because they thought he had an erection. He gave up scuba diving as wearing a wet suit made him “very self-conscious” and he finds it impossible to ride a bike. When he goes out, unless his trousers are very baggy, he tapes his penis to his leg or “tucks it underneath like the drag queen approach”.

He gave up scuba diving and finds it impossible to ride a bike

However, he has now written a book that he hopes will help challenge people’s preconceived notions about being “well endowed” and is an ambassador for male sex toy brand Fleshly, which embraces different body types with a focus on bigger-than-average anatomy. *metro.co.uk, 1 Jan; thepinknews.com, 20 Aug 2024; dailymail.co.uk, 11 Jun 2025.*

AN AMSTERDAM THING

Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum, the Dutch national gallery, has launched a major exhibition called “Safe Sex?” which looks at 19th century sex work. As its premier exhibit, the museum is displaying an early reusable condom made out of a sheep’s appendix. This has the phrase “This is my choice” emblazoned on it in French, accompanied by an erotic image of a nun examining the genitals of three clergymen. The image, the museum says, is a “parody of both celibacy and the Judgement of Paris from Greek mythology”. The condom dates back to the 1830s and was bought at auction by the museum last year. It had been spotted by curator Joyce Zelen and a colleague, who “were laughing” when they made their bid. “No-one else noticed it,” said Zelen, and they were the only ones to bid on it. “It’s in mint condition,” she says, and having examined it under UV light, she has determined it has not been used. Zelen believes the condom was a “luxury souvenir” from a fancy brothel in France, and is one of only two such items known to have survived to the present day. “As far as we can tell, we are the only art museum with a printed condom.”

Many reports on the item claim that the museum says the drawing on the condom is “a reference to the Pierre-Auguste Renoir painting *The Judgment of Paris*”, but this is nowhere to be found in the original Rijksmuseum press release. It would have been a mortifying error for a major gallery to make, as Renoir wasn’t even born until 1840, 10 years after it is believed the condom was made. The attribution is clearly an interpolation resulting from ham-fisted journalistic googling somewhere that went on to propagate through the media. *Irishexaminer.com, 3 Jun 2025; bbc.co.uk/news, 4 Jun 2025.*

STRANGE CONTINENT

ULRICH MAGIN finds Europe quaking, erupting and beseiged by killer bears and hungry martens

ABOVE: An aerial view of the volcanic eruption near Grindavik, on the Reykjanes Peninsula, Iceland, on 1 April.

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

NORTHERN ENCOUNTERS

"There are too many women traveling luxuriously in 'Darkest Africa'. Eskimos of Disco, Greenland, are publishing a newspaper," Charles Fort wrote in *New Lands*. So I checked whether there were still newspapers in Greenland: they have two, *Sermitsiaq* and *Atuagagdliutit/Grønlandsposten*, and both share the same page on the Internet. As Greenland has been much in the news in the last months, I thought I might look for fortean reports, and I found a fairly recent lake monster. Under the headline "Grønlandsk Loch Ness?" we read in *sermitsiaq.ag* of 16 September 2009 that Reindeer hunter Jens Frederiksen and a hunting companion "recently" saw a large animal the size of a whale in a lake at Nordre Strømfjord Nassuttooq, which could not have been either a whale or a seal. The body of water was Lake Seersinnillip Tasia, which can be found on Google maps. Frederiksen told the paper that "the large animal looked like a whale, but they never saw its tail during the hour they watched the animal as it dived and surfaced. The hunters guess that the unknown animal was the size of a whale." The head of the Department of Mammals and Birds at the Greenland Institute of Natural History, Pinngortitaleriffik, Fernando Ugarte, was unable to identify such an animal. He said he didn't think it was a whale, even though whales sometimes swim up to lakes; but Seersinnillip Tasia is some 10 kilometres (six miles) from the coast, and up on a mountain. Ugarte also thought it was unlikely to have been a seal, which don't grow to the size of whales.

More recently, on 11 November 2024, a Norwegian halibut trawler *Øygutt* caught the 8,000 ton, 115m (35ft) long submarine *USS Virgina* in its nets. The incident happened near Sommarøya, Tromsø, and completely destroyed the trawler's net and caused damage of about 4,000 Euros. *nordisch.info/norwegen, 15 Nov 2024.*

He recently saw a large animal the size of a whale in a lake

THE EXTREME EARTH

After Stromboli and Etna in Italy, and Thera in Greece, volcanos erupted in Iceland where activity has increased since the beginning of the year. Close to the fishing village of Grindavík, lava came out of a fissure in the earth on Reykjanes Peninsula near Reykjavik on 1 April. Barely 45 minutes after the eruption began, the Icelandic Meteorological Office IMO reported that the fissure was now approximately 700 metres (213ft) long. Although it appeared relatively stable, the IMO stated that it could not be ruled out that it could continue to expand northward or southward. Only a little later, a new fissure opened near the same village, and the Icelandic Civil Protection Agency subsequently declared an emergency level. The eruption had been preceded by a swarm of earth tremors. According to regional police chief Ulfar Ludviksson, only about 40 houses remained where people still lived in the fishing village, and most of the 4,000 residents had already left it at the end of 2023, before the first eruption of the recent series. It was the 11th eruption in the region since 2021, and number eight since December 2023. In November 2024, an eruption made headlines and lasted for 18 days. *dw.com/de, 1 Apr 2025.*

On 13 May, an earthquake shook the densely populated western quarters of Naples, with the epicentre in the Phlegraean Fields, Europe's largest supervolcano. The National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology (INGV) reported the magnitude at 4.4. As the earth trembled, people ran into the streets in panic in the city of Pozzuoli, and schools and rail services were disrupted. No major damage was reported, and experts are urging the people to remain calm. During the night of 14 May, at 1.51am, a 6.1 quake with an epicentre 78km (48 miles) below a point 15km (nine miles) from the island of Kasos hit the southern Greek islands. Tsunami warnings were issued in Crete and Kos, but luckily nothing of that sort happened. A day later, a 5.2 quake was registered at Konya, Turkey. *web.de, 13+14 May; General-Anzeiger,16 May 2025.*

ANIMAL ATTACKS

At the end of March, a brown bear attacked and killed a 59-year-old man in central Slovakia. As a result, the cabinet under Prime Minister Robert Fico decided to have 350 brown bears killed – about a quarter of the country's total population. Filip Kuffa, State Secretary at the Ministry of the Environment, stated that the risk posed by bears has multiplied dramatically in recent years: "The number of incidents is rising, more people are being injured, property damage is increasing – even accidents involving vehicles have become more frequent." It is estimated there are some 1,200 bears living in the country. Miroslava Ábelová of Greenpeace Slovakia objected, saying the culling plans were "absolutely reckless" and violated European nature conservation law, as the brown bear is strictly protected in the EU. In July 2024, a bear killed a 19-year-old female tourist in the Carpathian Mountains in Romania. In 2023, over 5,000 bears were killed in Romania; however, their bear population is six or seven times bigger than Slovakia's. *tagesschau.de, 11 Apr 2025.*

Meanwhile, on 8 May in Wuppertal, Germany, a marten chewed its way into the electricity works of the city and caused a blackout for more than 10,000 citizens, being electrocuted in the process. *wuppertaler-rundschau.de, 9 May 2025.* [Martens have form here; in 2016, they managed to shut down the Large Hadron Collider in two separate incidents; see **FT351:8** – Ed.]

Strangely enough, while the city lay in darkness, the bells of a cemetery chapel – which are electronically controlled – started to ring. As in February (**FT458:20**), when the bells had previously rung for no apparent reason, the ringing lasted for several hours, and the rogue marten is now being floated as a possible explanation for both incidents; which of course begs the question: if the bells are rung by electricity, how can the loss of electricity explain their behaviour? *wz.de, 9 May 2025.*

LEFT: Martens have a reputation for causing damage to vehicles and electrics. **BELOW:** The 'restored' statue of the Madonna in Studzionka, Poland.

SKOWIS-FOTO / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

PROLIFERATING GULFS

On 20 January, Donald Trump signed Executive Order 14172 ("Restoring Names That Honor American Greatness") and in all his power and glory decided unilaterally that from now on, the time-honoured and well-known name of Gulf of Mexico was to be replaced by the appellation "Gulf of America". While most people retained the old name, Google Maps was quick to follow the command and changed their maps. But each user can enter points of interest on Google Maps, and soon the computer cartography was overwhelmed with imaginary and recently invented Gulfs, all marked as points of interest. In Germany, each little pond or tiny bathing lake was renamed on the map, so that Germans had the choice of a holiday on the "Gulf of Wetzlar", "Gulf of Zündorf", or "Gulf of Wersten" (a pond in a Düsseldorf park), while a bathing lake, the Kinzigsee, could suddenly be found under the name "Gulf of Langenselbold". A user who renamed a gravel pit near Niederweimar as "Gulf of Marburg" added a places to visit note: "Believe me! This lake has been known as Gulf of Marburg since earliest times. This is a fact. It is true. Marburg First!" In some cases, small ponds were renamed several days in a row.

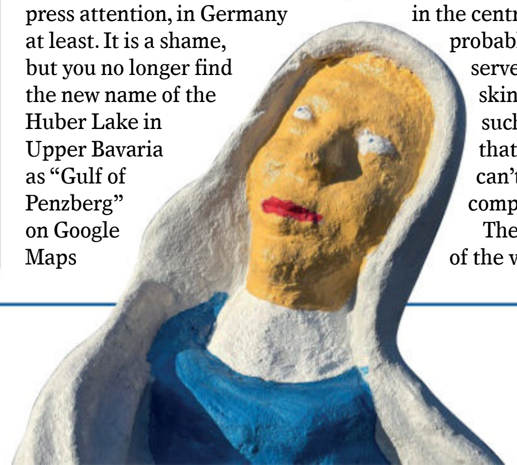
I have yet to learn whether other countries joined in the fun as well, however, a clean-up team of Google Maps removed all the fake Gulfs after only a few days – but couldn't stop the press attention, in Germany at least. It is a shame, but you no longer find the new name of the Huber Lake in Upper Bavaria as "Gulf of Penzberg" on Google Maps – and also lost is the note attached "Elon and Donald like this". *spiegel.de, 24 Mar; merkur.de, 25 Mar 2025.*

OUR LADY OF SPRINGFIELD

Well-intentioned but badly executed "renovations" of religious images have become a new trend in silly-season news coverage. And it has just again happened in Poland. A wooden cross with a statue of the Mother of God with Jesus hanging on the cross above her, has stood for more than 100 years in a chapel at Studzionka in Upper Silesia, Poland (it may date to 1820). The colour had faded, and some anonymous artist decided to restore the Lady to her former brightness – but utterly failed. Since the renewal, writes the German tabloid *Bild*, "only two colours dominate the carved wood: blue and yellow – with white and a small stroke of red. The brush was swung generously and without any attention to contours. A horizontal stroke serves as a mouth – which makes poor Mary look rather tight-lipped. It gets really creepy when you look into her eyes. Where they would be found on humans, there are just white blobs. And only with a magnifying glass can you see black dots in the centre, which are probably meant to serve as pupils. Her skin is painted such a pasty yellow that *The Simpsons* can't even begin to compete."

The people of the village are divided about what to think. A vegetable gardener said in an interview with Polish TV: "Well, you know, it doesn't matter what Mary and Jesus look like. The chapel is here. The saints are there. We can pray there." But an elderly lady complained: "I've never seen the Madonna with bright red lipstick. And Mary and Jesus both look like they have jaundice! No, things can't stay like this."

Mirosław Rymer from the Monument Protection Office in Katowice pointed out that the chapel is listed as a protected monument by the Silesian Voivodeship and therefore enjoys the highest level of protection. He said: "Even if the perpetrator had the best of intentions and didn't willfully destroy the cross, we will file a complaint against an unknown person." *bild.de, taz.de, 21 Mar 2025.*



100 YEARS AGO

On 17 August 1926, the *Saale-Zeitung* reported on a German "rain" of frogs, although it appears the term was only used metaphorically. "Rain of Frogs. Zerbst [Saxony-Anhalt]. Here, it looks like it has been raining frogs for the past few days. Thousands of tiny frogs have invaded the city streets and hopped around; the Friedrichstrasse has been particularly heavily visited by these harmless little creatures. The creatures are no more than a centimetre long. The oldest people can't remember frogs ever appearing here in such numbers. The young people collect them as if they were hunting cockchafers. But it would be foolish to destroy them, for frogs provide invaluable services in the fight against the mosquito plague. By eating the mosquito larvæ, they destroy vast numbers of these pests."

KARL SHUKER greets new crocs on the block and discovers the identity of a Japanese dragon

NEW CROCS FROM OLD

Neotropical crocodiles occupy a diverse array of habitats, ranging from coastal and inland to isolated insular populations. Mirroring this, their genetic diversity has lately been shown to be much greater than hitherto suspected. Now, two previously unrecognised species have been revealed, each of them confined to a small, separate Mexican island – namely, Cozumel and the atoll of Banco Chinchorro respectively. Both of these are located off Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. Their hitherto-unsuspected status as valid species in their own right was exposed by a study conducted on populations of the American crocodile *Crocodylus acutus* by a team of researchers featuring Prof. Hans Larsson from McGill University in Montreal, Canada. To the team's great surprise, as they had gone into the study assuming that all of the crocodiles ranging from Mexico's Baja California to Venezuela and across the Caribbean belonged to *C. acutus*, those inhabiting Cozumel and Banco Conchorro respectively exhibited levels of genetic differentiation far greater than could be explained merely by categorising them as variants of *C. acutus*. Not only that, they were decidedly discrete genetically from each other too.

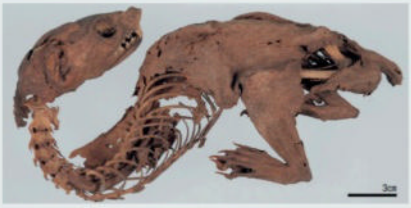
These two erstwhile cryptic species have yet to be formally named and described, but with each population containing fewer than 1,000 breeding individuals, they will now become the focus of conservation strategies to ensure their long-term survival. Happily, however, both populations currently appear stable.

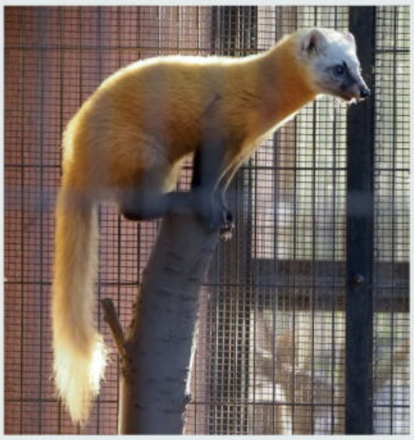
www.sci.news/biology/two-new-species-neotropical-crocodiles-13858.html; www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1055790325000582

SOME EX-DRAGONS EXPOSED

Japan's Shosoin Treasure House (aka the Shosoin Repository) is a long wooden building, raised above the ground on numerous short stilts, which stands on the northwest rear corner of Todaiji Temple's Daibutsuden Hall, and is largely unaltered since the 8th century. It is well-named, because this impressive edifice contains countless priceless treasures and relics owned by Japan's Royal Family, and has done so for many centuries. Among them is what has traditionally been deemed to be the mummified sun-dried carcase of a small but highly-esteemed 'rainbow dragon', referred to as the Koryu.

JIM SANDERSON / CREATIVE COMMONS




KESTREL / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

LEFT: Professor Hans Larsson with newly identified crocodile species. **BELOW LEFT:** The Shosoin Temple Koryu. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Tests have revealed the mystery mummy to be the skeleton of a Japanese marten.

Measuring approximately 40cm (15.7in) long from its head to part of its tail, it lacks front limbs, merely possessing a pair of short hind legs, thereby appearing quite serpentine in form, as do Japanese dragons according to classic Japanese mythology. This intriguing specimen's existence can be dated back at least as far as the year 1429. That was when Ashikaga Yoshinori (1394-1441), the sixth shogun of the Muromachi Shogunate, visited Todaiji Temple, and, as documented by one of the temple's monks at that time, discovered an object there that in the shogun's opinion resembled a small sun-dried dragon. This was the Koryu, although historians believe that this name was not assigned to it until around the Edo Period (1603-1867). In any event, this specimen has resided in the Shosoin Treasure House ever since.

As this is a physical, tangible specimen that can be subjected to a direct, comprehensive scientific analysis, scientists have long been interested in doing precisely that in order to determine its cryptic zoological identity. And now they have done, making the Koryu mummy the very first Shosoin treasure to have been subjected to scrutiny via radiocarbon dating techniques.

For as revealed in a scientific paper published in Japanese on 23 April 2025 in issue 47 of the *Bulletin of Office of the Shosoin Treasure House*, a team of researchers from Tokyo using this procedure as well as X-ray technology revealed that the specimen is actually the skeleton (minus its forelegs) of a weasel relative known as the Japanese marten *Martes melampus* (thus validating a hitherto-untested suggestion dating back several decades), probably a full-grown female; and that it dated back to the mid-11th/mid-12th-century, thereby confirming that it would have been there when the temple was visited by Yoshinori in the 15th century. Moreover, as the 11th-12th century was a period when the Shosoin Repository faced five separate sets of repairs, it is possible that a wild marten found its way into the Repository through some damaged section but was unable to find its way back out and died there, eventually becoming mummified, thus explaining its origin inside the Repository. Alternatively, it may have been brought there deliberately. The team also examined relics from three other supposed dragons here, and revealed that they were derived from a Kobe mole, a crow, and a pigeon respectively. Intriguingly, traditional Japanese legend claims that after the Koryu mummy was added to the Shosoin Repository's collection, rain would fall every time that the repository was opened – and sure enough, when the Tokyo team arrived and attempted to begin their work inside the repository, heavy downpours of rain fell, causing them to have to reschedule their work. Japanese dragons were intimately associated with rain, so even though it has turned out to have been a marten, it would seem that the Koryu mummy may have nonetheless acquired some of their pluvial capabilities!

www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/photo/55316039; www.thesun.co.uk/tech/34848980/samurai-solves-dragon-mystery/5; www.foxnews.com/travel/experts-solve-mystery-ancient-mummified-dragon-discovered-japanese-shogun

PET TREKKIN'

More amazing animal odysseys as a Siamese cat crosses four states, a mini-dachshund goes rogue and a retriever cross leads rescuers a merry dance

SUSANNE ANGUIANO

GEORGIA GARDNER

LEFT: A slimmed-down Rayne Beau rests after his 60-day adventure. **ABOVE RIGHT**: The feisty and elusive Valerie, who evaded capture for 16 months.

THE CAT CAME BACK

For some reason Benny and Susanne Anguiano, from Salinas, California, decided to take their Siamese cat Rayne Beau with them when they went camping in the vast wilderness of Yellowstone National Park. While there, something startled the cat, and he shot off into the trees and disappeared. The couple spent five days searching, calling him, putting out food and laying out his toys in the hope of attracting him, but without success. Eventually a campsite worker explained to the couple that the area was full of grizzly bears and coyotes, and that their cat had probably been eaten by a predator, so the Anguianos reluctantly went home, with Susanne saying: "That was the hardest day, because I felt like I was abandoning him." For 60 days the family mourned Rayne Beau's loss, but then they got a call from pet tracking service Pet Watch, who told them that a stray cat had been handed in to a shelter in Roseville, three hours north of Salinas and 800 miles (1,287km) from Yellowstone, and that he had been identified as Rayne Beau by his microchip. Stunned, the couple made the drive to collect him. "He was really depleted," said Susanne. "He probably didn't have much energy left to go any farther." The cat had lost 40 per cent of his body weight, but was otherwise in reasonable health, considering his ordeal.

> *The cat had lost 40 per cent of his body weight during his ordeal*

Yellowstone Park is larger than some US states, and to get back to California Rayne Beau would have had to cross four states, including stretches of mountain and desert. The Anguianos are mystified as to how he managed to make the journey, but Susanne, who described her cat's return as "a miracle", said: "The fact that he was in California and just three hours north of us – I think that proves that Rayne Beau was trying to get towards his home." *theguardian.co.uk, 20 Sept; nytimes.com, 22 Sept 2024.*

SAUSAGE GOES WILD

Another pet who made a break for it while camping was miniature dachshund Valerie, who escaped from her pen at a campsite on Kangaroo Island off the coast of South Australia in November 2023. Before this, the tiny 4kg (9lb) dog "would never leave [the] side" of her owner, Georgia Gardner, and showed no signs of a wild streak. There were several sightings around the campsite after she escaped, but Valerie eluded capture, then disappeared. As Kangaroo Island is in Australia, it is full of startlingly venomous snakes and other lethal wildlife, so the chance of a small, pampered dachshund surviving for any time in the wild were considered minimal, and like the Anguianos, after a week of searching Gardner and her partner Josh Fishlock reluctantly went home. However, 16 months after her disappearance, Valerie was seen alive and well on the other side of the island. Initially, Gardner met the news with disbelief, but when Valerie was photographed with her distinctive pink collar, she began to hope that the dog really was alive. Local charity Kangala Wildlife Rescue volunteered to try and catch Valerie, but she proved to be feisty and elusive. However, they eventually succeeded, using a trap baited with some of Gardner's old clothes which carried her scent. Valerie turned out to be in good health, and had in fact gained weight during her adventure. While it is possible she was being fed by people on the island, Prof Paul McGreevy, of the University of Sydney's veterinary school, said that dachshunds were "extremely resourceful" and believed she could have survived by eating roadkill and drinking dam water, although she might also have been eating birds, frogs and mice, as "mini dachshunds were well disposed to finding food on the ground. *theguardian.com, 26 Mar; BBC News, 26 Apr 2025.*

AMBER'S ODYSSEY

Amber, a street dog rescued from Qatar by the animal charity KS Angels Rescue, lasted just one day with her foster family in Britain before lighting out for the territory. The five-year-old retriever cross was being looked after by a family in Bramshaw, Hampshire, when she escaped. For the next 36 days the dog ranged across Hampshire and Dorset, covering about 100 miles (160km), and there were 63 reported sightings of her. However, by the time anyone arrived to follow up on a sighting, the dog had turned up somewhere else. Eventually, Amber reached the sea at Poole Harbour… and just kept going. She swam a mile out to Brownsea Island, where a local tried to befriend her. After four days there, Amber decided to swim back, passing a ferry whose crew at first thought she was a seal. However, she was swimming against the tide and not making much headway. "The boat crew spotted her struggling with the tide, she wasn't going to make the swim back, so they turned the boat around," said Kelly Parker from KS Angels. "She hooked her paws on to the ladder and one of the lads jumped into the water and helped her out." The charity was in discussions with the person who had been feeding her on Brownsea Island about giving Amber a permanent home there. *theguardian.co.uk, 3 Jun 2025.*

MEDICAL BAG

This month's expert medical advice: always read the label, don't drink the holy water and avoid living too near to a golf course...

SLOW ON THE UPTAKE

For four months Canadian doctor Chris Loreto had been suffering chest pains that became intense whenever he exercised, which he put down to acid reflux. The medication he had been prescribed for it did not seem to be working, though, and even when he experienced extreme pain while playing hockey on 12 November, he "shrugged it off", according to the Timmins and District Hospital, where he worked. "He went to work the next morning," the hospital said. "Near the end of his shift, a patient had a massive heart attack which Dr Loreto jumped in to help with. Afterwards, he spoke to the patient's wife to learn more about his symptoms leading up to this event. Both he and the patient were on the same medication for acid reflux." It dawned on Loreto that for him, too, the chest pain might not be acid reflux, so got his colleagues to give him some tests, which, the hospital says, "confirmed he was having a heart attack". Loreto ended up on the same ward as the patient he had saved and said that in retrospect he should have taken his chest pains seriously, particularly as they persisted, and got worse during exercise. *abcnews4.com, 14 Feb 2025.*

CHRIS LORETO

CARLY ELECTRIC / X

ABOVE LEFT: Doctor Chris Loreto's self diagnosis was dangerously wrong. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Carly Electric was struck by lightning. **LEFT:** The holy well at Bermel Giorgis, Ethiopia, the probable source of a cholera outbreak.

ASKING FOR IT?

The appropriately named Carly Electric, 30, a sex worker and comedian from Queensland, Australia, may have come to regret the obsession with thunderstorms that led her to have three lightning-related tattoos, when she was actually struck by a bolt as she rushed out of her house to get a better view of a storm. The blast paralysed Electric, leaving her feeling "drugged". "I was covered in sweat, light-headed and almost euphoric. I couldn't move, not even an inch," she said. Rushed to hospital, Electric was diagnosed with keraunoparalysis, temporary paralysis of the limbs caused by a lightning strike, from which she eventually made a full recovery, but with some peculiar long-lasting effects. "The top of my head is very sensitive, where I was hit – it's hot to the touch, so I have to avoid it when brushing my hair," Electric said, and she also found that her eyes had changed colour, saying, "My previously green eyes are now dark brown." *ndtv.com, 30 Mar 2025.*

BLESSED CHOLERA

When several patients in the UK and Germany were diagnosed with multidrug-resistant cholera, doctors were initially baffled as to where they could have contracted it. One clue was that all seven patients were of Ethiopian origin, but while four had recently travelled to Ethiopia, where there is an active cholera outbreak, the remaining three had not. When the German patients were questioned, it was found that the two who had been to Ethiopia had acquired a small plastic bottle of water from the holy well in Bermel Giorgis. Once they had returned home, both of them had drunk some of the water while the third person had received splashes of water to the face, including the lips, and is likely to have ingested some of it. Of the four UK patients, two had also visited Bermel Giorgis and brought back holy water, which they had shared with the other two patients. As a result, it is thought likely that the source of the outbreak was the holy well in Bermel Giorgis contaminated with cholera bacteria. Consumption of holy water has been previously identified as a risk factor for cholera in Ethiopia, but it is unusual for it to spread to Europe. *medicalxpress.com, 10 Apr 2025.*

GOLF KILLS

A paper published by Dr Brittany Krzyzanowski in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reports that people living within a mile of a golf course have a 126 per cent higher risk of developing Parkinson's disease than those who live more than six miles away. Parkinson's disease is an incurable neurodegenerative disease that causes symptoms such as tremors, slow movement and rigid muscles. It eventually kills, and currently afflicts 11.8 million people globally. Areas where drinking water supplies were also used to water golf courses had the largest number of Parkinson's sufferers and the researchers correlated concentrations of pesticides of the kinds used to keep golf courses unnaturally smooth and green with the number of Parkinson's cases in a course's vicinity, finding that they consistently matched. This suggests that pesticide runoff from golf courses in the ground-

KAROLINA GRABOWSKA

ABOVE: There has been a wave of patients mistaking glue for eyedrops.

water is behind the upsurges in disease nearby. Dr Michael Okun, national medical adviser for the Parkinson's Foundation in the US said, "Who will this affect? Everyone, including families, health systems, economies and society. The science is accumulating. The signals are clear," and suggested immediate action is needed against golf courses and their pesticide use. *newsweek.com, 12 May 2025.*

STICKY SITUATIONS

Doctors in Colorado have advised people to read the labels on bottles of eye drops before using them, after a wave of cases in which patients mistakenly put glue into their eyes instead. Ophthalmologist Dr Richard Davidson said that he was seeing a significant increase in cases where people had put nail or lash glue in their eyes because the products come in similar bottles. "There might be a couple of months where we don't see anyone, and then all of a sudden, we may get two or three people with this type of situation," he said. "It's amazing how many products look similar, and we can end up putting them in the eye by accident. Sometimes it's eye makeup glue, sometimes it's ear drops."

"This glue dries in a matter of seconds," Davidson added. "The quicker you act, the better." He said that doctors sometimes have to scrape glue off the surface of a patient's eye, but reassured people that it rarely causes permanent damage. *upi.com, 12 Mar 2025.*

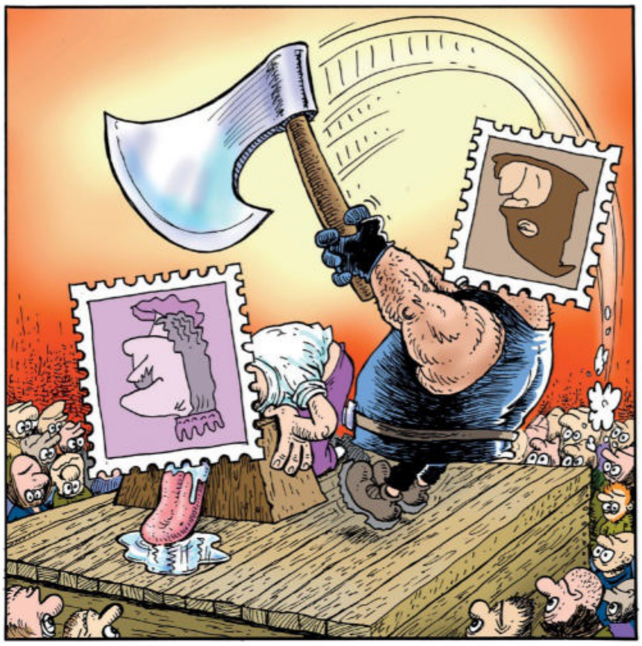
PARASITIC TWIN

A team of doctors in Delhi, India, have removed a parasitic twin from the abdomen of a 17-year-old boy. Such twins are underdeveloped conjoined twins that are completely reliant on the larger twin for survival. In this case the twin consisted of two fully formed legs, buttocks and external genitalia and was attached to the teen's breastbone, sustained by an artery in his chest. Unusually, the boy could sense pain, touch and changes in temperature through his twin. "There wasn't much connection with other main organs like the liver or kidneys, though," said Dr Asuri Krishna, who led the medical team carrying out the operation, which was a particularly challenging one due to the boy's age. "Only 40-50 cases of parasitic twins have been documented in world medical literature and, in those cases, the surgery had been attempted on children," said Krishna. The operation took two and a half hours, and was done in two stages; first the twin was removed and then an associated cystic mass was extracted from around the boy's internal organs. The patient recovered quickly and was discharged four days after his surgery, and has suffered no complications. Before his twin was removed, the boy said, "I couldn't travel anywhere or do any physical activity," adding that he was the subject of ridicule and gossip, resulting in feelings of isolation and loneliness that impacted on his mental health and led to him dropping out of school in the eighth grade. The 17-year-old said he was ecstatic about the outcome of his operation, and was looking forward to the future. "I hope to study and get a job. A new world has opened up to me," he said. *BBC News, 26 Feb 2025.*

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

293: OFF WITH THEIR HEADS



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

It is illegal in the UK to stick a stamp on an envelope upside down.

The "truth"

Some myths seem to be believed precisely because they are so unbelievable. It's as if we say to ourselves, "The world is absurd, this story is absurd, ergo this story must be true." The upside-down stamp is a good example. In its most extreme form it states that you can be hanged for treason for placing your stamp arse-over-tit, because all UK postage stamps carry a portrait of the reigning monarch, turning him upside down shows an anti-monarchist standpoint, and republicanism is still technically illegal under treason laws of the 14th and 19th centuries. In practice, there hasn't been a UK treason trial since 1946, death as the theoretically available punishment for treason was finally abolished in 1998, and no one has ever been prosecuted for philatelic inversion. The Government Legal Department says that upside-down stamps are not considered treasonous, and Royal Mail adds "It's a myth… There's nothing to say you can't put a stamp upside down." But have a look at Reddit, Quora and the like and you'll see that vast numbers of people still prefer the old tale.

Sources

@GovernmentLegal, Tweet 31 Dec 2021; www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17610820; www.ibanet.org/UK-considers-reform-of-treason-law; www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/37/section/36/; www.philatelicdatabase.com/nostalgia/the-language-of-stamps/

Disclaimer

Postal overturning might not be illegal, but it may have some significance. Apparently, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was a "language of stamps", comparable to the Victorian era's Language of Flowers, in which a downside-up stamp placed top left means "I love you", but top right stands for "Write no more". Upside down in line with the surname is a rather craven way of breaking the news that "I am engaged".

Mythchaser

This myth usually applies to the UK, or sometimes the Commonwealth, but occasionally pops up elsewhere. So – is there any territory in the world where a reversed stamp might in fact be illegal?

The UFO doctors

NIGEL WATSON finds help is avalable for those suffering from UFO trauma or ontological shock...

UAPMED

This is a relatively new organisation that provides information on how healthcare professionals can support anyone traumatised by the UFO phenomenon. To this end they plan to a run a series of online courses that are intended to end the stigma attached to individuals who report a UAP experience; prepare first responders for UAP events and individuals exposed to UAPs; advise medical professionals on physical effects from UAP exposure; provide guidelines for mental health professionals on UAP exposure.

Writing on their UAPMed website, Sarah Harmon in her article "From Sensationalism to Support" notes: "The portrayal of UAP encounters often borders on the fantastical, which can marginalise individuals who report such experiences...This sensationalism can deter people from seeking mental health support, fearing disbelief or ridicule..."

Elsewhere the website states: "Whether it's a sighting, a close interaction, or watching news and social media, UAP exposure is an event that stays with you." And: "It can happen to anyone." UAPMed even publishes a "UAP Exposure Bill of Rights" that aims to be a "foundation for respectful and supportive treatment of individuals exposed to UAP, safeguarding their health, well-being, and dignity."

Although the website contents look relatively unbiased, there does seem to be an implication that UAPs are real and it includes a link to the imposing sounding "Anomalous Acute And Subacute Field Effects on Human and Biological Tissues" report, which asserts these physiological outcomes of a close encounter are due to exposure to "unconventional and advanced energy systems". As I noted in a previous column (**FT420:30**), the report was based on stories from newspapers and UFO magazines, not from respected scientific sources.

UAPMed warns that you should "Always consult a qualified healthcare provider for medical concerns." I would also warn people not to believe everything that UAP proponents say; nonetheless, it is a worthy aim to support traumatised people whatever its underlying cause. *www.uapmed.org*

UNHIDDEN UNCOVERED

The UK equivalent of UAPMed is unHidden founded by John Priestland. He categorically believes in the reality of UAPs and that by not accepting this fact the UK Government hinders the Civil Service from accessing flight safety risks and offering mental health support to people who have had an anomalous experience.

In April 2024 they produced a White Paper entitled "The Impact of Exceptional Experiences and disclosure on mental health and wellbeing", which is a detailed overview of the UAP subject and its psychological impact, with the recommendation that "the NHS and professional bodies should develop guidance for health and social care professionals, to make it easier for them to consult patients presenting with Exceptional Experiences in a non-judgmental and evidence-based manner".

The website also contains their "Protocol for supporting experiencers and people affected by ontological shock". The site's glossary of UFO terms helpfully tells us that ontological shock is "the anxiety that people feel as and when they realise that there are other non-human intelligences out there (and humankind is not top of the food chain)." The term could also apply to people who realise there are no non-human UAPs cavorting about in our skies. *www.unhidden.org/*

MALMGREN MYTHS

In the last column (**FT459:28**) we took a jaundiced look at the UFO stories of Harald Malmgren, and that viewpoint is reinforced by Douglas Dean Johnson's deep dive into the veracity of his claims.

Even by ufological standards what Johnson reveals is quite shocking. In a detailed analysis of Malmgren's statement that he saw a video of a UFO being shot down by a Thor missile, on a mission called 'Bluegill Triple Prime', it is likely Malmgren inserted himself into a scenario suggested by Australian researcher Geoffrey Cruickshank.

Johnson is not impressed by Cruickshank's paper "Supporting Evidence for Bluegill Triple Prime UAP Shootdown Theory," noting it is riddled with expressions like "it seems entirely possible", "it is hypothesised", "it is posited here", and "the most likely place", mixed with dollops of speculation.

Johnson includes three video clips of the falling orb (UFO) on his website, where he indicates that it was probably the 65ft (20m) tall Thor booster rocket blasted by the nuclear device it had just launched into the atmosphere.

Ten of Malmgren's major claims are equally and extensively demolished by Johnson. These include his boast that he was second only to Roger Bannister to run a mile in less than four minutes; that he was recruited into Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's group of "whiz kids"; that he held a "Q" clearance from the Atomic Energy Commission; that his ideas were a major factor in the development of missile defence thinking; and that he was a senior advisor to four presidents.

BELOW: Harald Malmgren's "more exciting version of his life-stories: included a number of UFO-related incidents.

None of those statements are true, and as Johnson puts it: "Some years ago he [Malmgren] began to make up an alternative, much more exciting version of his life-stories in which he played a vastly more important role in world affairs than the mundane, respectable reality. Over time and with encouragement, those stories multiplied, and they grew ever more self-glorifying."

Although Malmgren was described as being egotistical and abrasive, he did have substantial accomplishments in the field of international economics and trade policy. As Johnson observes: "Many men in their later years would have looked back on those genuine accomplishments with satisfaction." *douglasjohnson.ghost.io*

UFOLOGICAL PHASES

Richard Geldreich, Jr (lover of mysteries) used AI software to obtain this six-part analysis of UFO activity. Firstly: "Phase 0 (1800s): Mythic, low-impact contact; little to no human containment; Phase 1 (pre '47): Technological probing; early military awareness; Phase 2 (1947-1980s): Mass sightings, landings, physical and trace evidence (dropped isotopes, landing impressions, "Angel Hair", Soviet "fragments"); Programme formalises; Phase 3 (1990s-2020s): Digital-era adaptation; containment strains under leaks." In the future we will get "Phase 4: Containment collapses; phenomenon escalates signalling. Phase 5: Mass contact; humanity faces ontological reset."

Chris Aubeck and others on the Magonia Exchange group roundly regarded this as a naive and simplistic analysis, with Jacques Vallee noting: "AI should not be asked to make a judgment about data that is dispersed, badly researched, incomplete and 95% irrelevant to the subject." *medium.com/@richgel99/phenomenon-contact-phases-75bd7ea0ce81; groups.io/g/MagoniaExchange*

Off to see the wizard

JENNY RANDLES finds herself pondering magic and UFOs during a walk around Alderley Edge

In the early days of the summer I met up with an old friend, Kate, whom I had not seen in a year or so, for an expedition to a place I once knew well but had not revisited since the 1980s.

Back then, my fiancé Paul and I would love to walk the wooded trails of the heavily worked ancient landscape of Alderley Edge in north Cheshire. This has many legends linked to King Arthur and the sword in the stone, and when you climb through thick foliage in midsummer, with just the occasional faint interruption of an aircraft taking off from Manchester, there is indeed an eerie, magical feel to the place.

On this occasion the British weather did its summer trick of closing in fast. It was no longer safe to be walking these high trails, so Kate and I made our way cautiously downhill to welcome lower ground and the Wizard Inn, where sustenance awaited.

There have long been legends here associated with a wizard who met a farmer and showed the gateway to the underworld. Some even link these with Merlin. We tend to think of UFOs as a modern phenomenon of extraterrestrial origin, but visiting magical places, as we did on that wet June day, revealed to me a difference. As we sat in the welcome if brief sunshine at the Wizard Inn, I realised how tales perceived as wizardly in origin by those who lived a rural life far removed from urban areas were simply an illustration of Arthur C Clarke's remark that, to such people, our advanced technology would be indistinguishable from magic.

I have been investigating UFO stories for over half a century now, and one thing is clear. They do have more in common with magical tales than with science fiction in how the events occur, and especially in how they are interpreted.

Yes, long ago, a farmer seeing a cave appear along with images of another world, produced by an apparent magician, would be proof to him that magic was real. However, today we would see the same thing in a very different way. The march of technology now lets us do such things by what once would have seemed to be magic. Turn on your TV or a phone and someone 150 years ago might well presume you to be a magician too.

Magic is only ignorance in disguise. The person you call a magician knows how to do something that you do not. Once you learn how the trick is done, it will be you who is the magician to someone unfamiliar with what you are really doing. So are there wizards in those hills in Alderley – or are they just ordinary things from a different time and space that we are not yet capable of understanding? But one day perhaps we will.

THE WIZARD OF EDGE
ICE CREAM + MILKSHAKES
GRAB + GO DRINKS

JENNY RANDLES

A graphic designer was seeing a dwarf-like figure, though to him it looked like an alien from UFO tales he had heard

UFOs are up there in the sky. They fly over Alderley every day. In the misty low cloud, as Kate and I stood atop looking out towards the Cheshire plains, it was easy for the weather and the situation to make movements that in all likelihood were nothing weird, but they seemed eerie in the misty horizon between perception and misperception, and ultimately between fact or fiction.

There have been UFO sightings in the vicinity of Alderley Edge, of course. Like most, upon investigation, they are usually explicable as a misperception of something else, such as an aircraft behaving oddly, or hot air balloons, which are common enough on summer days over this part of the country.

One event in Cheshire, quite near Alderley, was more curious. Roy Sandbach and I investigated it, but were never able to get to the bottom of what happened.

A graphic designer – his occupation was possibly relevant – was seeing a dwarf-like figure. If it had been seen in past times near the Wizard, it would likely be interpreted as an elf or gnome. However, to him it looked like an alien of the kind he had heard about from UFO tales. Though I felt that, from his description, calling it an elf was probably more accurate.

Twice during the autumn of 1984 this entity appeared suddenly in his home, seeming to try to communicate with him by 'beaming' words he found hard to explain into his mind. Then the being vanished. The witness was an intelligent man and really wanted to understand what had happened. But neither he nor my co-investigator Roy Sandbach could figure this one out, any more than I could.

Such was the intelligence of this witness he pre-empted some of my questions. He noted that the small being disappeared in a flash. Being an educated person he pointed out that: "It vanished in a moment. But how if it had a solid body did it not leave a vacuum of displaced air? The gap would have sucked more air back in as it vanished, and I should have heard the noise."

That, I thought, was a very astute observation and not what someone seeking attention or fantasising likely would point out.

He further noted that he was short sighted and, because of that, had to screw up his eyes to see the being in focus on both occasions. He saw this entity imperfectly before doing so – suggesting to him that his eyes were involved in the event, not just his imagination. He had seen something that really was there.

With such contradictory evidence I was as bemused as he was. But what also came across to me was a fundamental question. Just what is the difference between something that to us is technology we do not yet possess, and magic that we can imagine but not duplicate?

MAKING THE CASE FOR SPONTANEOUS HUMAN COMBUSTION

PART 1

LARRY E ARNOLD re-opens his hot case files and returns to his extensive investigations of a phenomenon that medical authorities and professional sceptics refuse to accept – despite what many argue is overwhelming evidence for its reality.

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5 Cents
CALIFORNIA STATE LIBRARY
MONDAY MORNING, MARCH 28, 1960
DAILY 5 CENTS, SUNDAY 15 CENTS
Mystery Blaze Cremate
Woman in H Home
Khru
Rous
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Cause Of Fire
Killing Woman
Still Mystery
Baffled police yesterday continued to do
the mystery fire at 1200 Cherry Street North
in which Mrs. Mary Hardy Reeser, 67, was
white-hot blaze which consumed most of
still lacking was an explan
what fuel created the
victim's body

Spontaneous.
Human.
Combustion.

These three words – and their translated equivalencies – are found and accepted individually without consternation in every firefighter's vocabulary and training.

Daring to fuse these words into a singular concept, however, unleashes from most fire experts a firestorm of disdain, derision, denial, damnation and debunking.

Spontaneous Human Combustion (SHC) ranks prominently among the damned enigmas catalogued by Charles Fort.

Historically, SHC is characterised by a person almost wholly incinerated with an assortment of extremities partially extant amid nearby easily ignitable combustibles that exhibit uncharacteristic minimal-to-no flame damage in the absence of any sensibly identifiable ignition source.

It is an alleged anomaly argued about in literature for centuries. Mention dates back at least to the Renaissance chronicler Thomas H Bartholini, who described in his 1654 *Historiarum Anatomicarum Rariorum* a risk faced by some mediæval unfortunates: the predicament of wine imbibers igniting internally.

We have held this extraordinarily rare booklet. Bartholini recounts (chapter 70, "Flames from the Belly") the fate of a Polish knight, Polonus, who "having consumed two ladles of strong wine, vomited a flame and was thereupon totally consumed, according to a report from his parents, Mr and Mrs Eberhard Vorstius."

This event – emphasis on "totally consumed" – occurred sometime in the first half of the 16th century. Had it happened to a mere squire or serf, no doubt it would never have been reported.

Bartholini deems two more cases to be SHC, both regrettably anonymous and without details, perchance because one is reported by an esteemed colleague and the other said to be witnessed by a doctor in Lyon, France.[1]

SHC would afterwards become a hotly debated pyrophenomenon for some two centuries – its advocates including many members of the medical community[2] – until 1850.

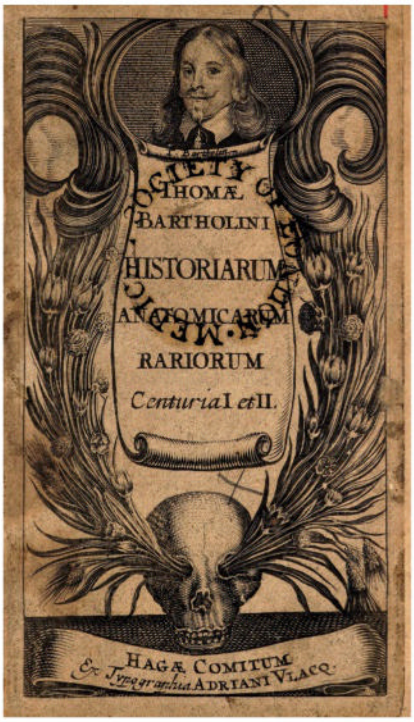
DAMNING THE DATA

That year, Prussian-born scientist Baron Justus von Liebig applied his considerable intellect, chemical expertise, and fame to the controversy. Insisting that victims of alleged SHC were intemperate sots, Liebig proved to his experimental satisfaction that flesh saturated with alcohol does not produce a human incendiary. Thus in *Zur Beurtheilung der Selbstverbrennungen des menschlichen Körpers* (1850) he declared that alcohol, ignited, burns off to produce at best superficial charring after combustion ceases in a drunkard. Ergo: drunks do *not* catastrophically combust nor, by logic's extension, can anyone else.

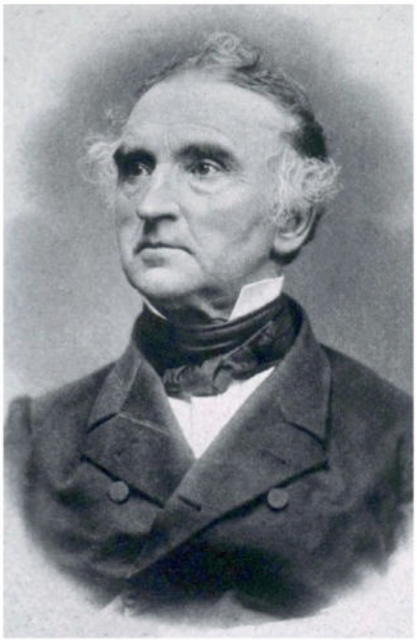
Liebig's chemistry, rationale, and reputation effectively extinguished belief in SHC.

Did he disprove SHC, though? No.

We submit his conclusion is based on a faulty premise.


THOMÆ
BARTHOLINI
HISTORIARUM
ANATOMICARUM
RARIORUM
Centuria I et II.
HAGÆ COMITUM
Ex Typographia ADRIANI VLACQ.

"HAVING CONSUMED TWO LADLES OF STRONG WINE, HE VOMITED A FLAME AND WAS THEREUPON TOTALLY CONSUMED..."



LEFT: Thomas Bartolini's 1654 *Historarium Anatomicarum Rariorum* listed a number of cases of what would now be described as spontaneous human combustion. **BELOW:** Baron Justus von Liebig demonstrated, to his own satisfaction, that drunks do not spontaneously combust.

Imagine the Baron finds a Lamborghini Murciélago (lucky guy) outside his laboratory with instructions to add fuel and turn the ignition key for an amazing ride. Believing it a proper fuel, he pours in a pint of pilsner and turns the key. Engine sputters, then silence. Worthless transportation, he yells; give me a horse! Had von Liebig instead selected high-octane petrol in lieu of pilsner, he'd be motoring wide-eyed through Munich at speeds imaginable to him.

By choosing an ineffective fuel and an imperfect premise, von Liebig proved that *one* type of combustion – the oxidizing of alcohol – does not cause a person to catch fire in an extraordinary way. His inability to consider SHC without the exothermic burning of alcohol was a limitation of his reasoning and a failure to consider a larger range of fuels, processes, and phenomena.

Von Liebig's experiment did not negate the prospect of SHC *per se.*

(We too have done his experiment, multiple times, including muscle-on-bone marinated for a year in a whiskey-vodka-brandy cocktail. The results? Each time, comparable to von Liebig's. Burn samples remained 98-99% intact. No calcinated bone and dry powder *ever*.)

Nonetheless, von Liebig's flawed overreach became established dogma.

For example, German forensicologist Johann Ludwig Casper bemoaned in his *A Handbook of the Practice of Forensic Medicine, based upon personal experience*: "It is sad to think… that in an earnest scientific work, in the year of grace 1861, we must still treat of the fable of 'spontaneous combustion,' a thing that no one has ever seen or examined, the very proofs of whose existence rest upon the testimony of perfectly untrustworthy non-professionals, upon newspaper paragraphs, all of which in their statements laugh to scorn every known physical law."

Casper's conclusion is easy to embrace. Given the vast experience of firefighters and forensics experts who daily handle fire fatalities, the human body is assuredly not easily destroyed by fire. Body burn patterns normally involve blisters, skin splits, and colour banding of skin. Extended time will expose and render subcutaneous fat so that it might melt and liquefy, becoming a fuel source that can keep flames alive, possibly for several hours under the right conditions. Inner bones of the head, torso, and extremities gradually undergo blackened charring. When all soft tissues have burned away, bone survives to offer physical evidence of the body.

The 19th-century American physician Dr Strong professed in *A Treatise on Medical Jurisprudence* (1855) his "considerable experience burning up or getting rid of human remains by fire." Yet to burn a pirate's corpse proved a chore he sweated through in more ways than one:

"I began upon it one night, with a wood fire, in a large old-fashioned fire-place. I built a rousing fire and sat up all night, piling on the wood and the flesh, and had not got it consumed by morning. I was afraid of a visit from the police; and by 11 o'clock they gave me a call, to know what made such a smell in the street. I finished it up, somehow, that afternoon; but I look upon it as no small operation to burn up a body."[3]

More recently, on 11 June 2023, a tanker truck rolled over and burst into flames in northeast Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The fearsome gasoline-fed inferno collapsed the northbound lanes of Interstate 95, yet allowed for the deceased driver's identification based on remains recovered from his burned-up tractor cab.

Bodies blackened in hot 1500°F/826°C structure fires can reveal if death occurred before or during the blaze because throats, œsophagi and lungs usually remain for autopsy to reveal presence or absence of inhaled flame and particulates. Forensic scientists find for murder-arson because accelerant-doused cadavers don't hide stab or gunshot wounds. "Dame of Flame" taphonomist Elayne J Pope insists she can find evidence of foul play in "skeletal injury patterns from gunshot wounds, blunt force and sharp force trauma" in the worst-burned corpses.[4]

Consequently, many vehemently debunk an SHC-type burn-up as ludicrous or impossible. Hence, an interminable parade of denials of this damned fortean topic.

In their *Forensic Medicine: A Textbook for Students and Practitioners* (1955), Drs Smith & Fiddes vow that "Spontaneous combustion of the human body cannot occur, and no good purpose can be served by discussing it."

Harvard-trained forensics specialist Dr Lester Adelson, who served as Cuyahoga County (Ohio) medical examiner and chief pathologist (retired 1994) and wrote *The Pathology of Homicide* avows: "I do not for a single second buy the overheated concept of spontaneous human combustion… Bodies don't burn this way!"

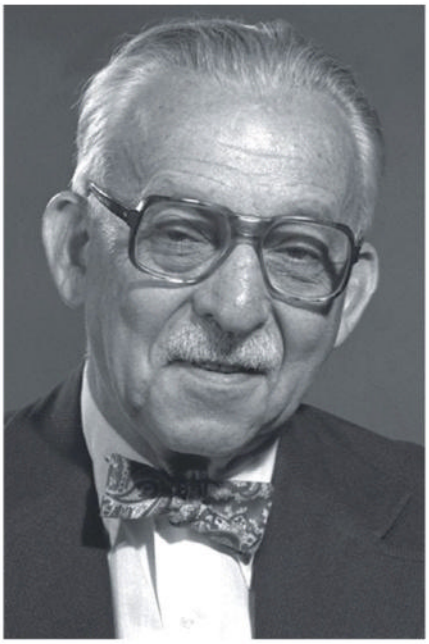
The late American 'skeptic', Joe Nickell, declared SHC to be "pseudo-science" and "poppycock," and inveighed in *Skeptical Inquirer* (March/April 1998) that "Spontaneous human combustion (SHC) cases continue to spark controversy (so to speak), largely due to the efforts of nonscientist authors and journalists." Among them, he lists this writer.

German forensic biologist Mark Benecke explains in the same issue of *Skeptical Inquirer* that SHC is nonsense because "there are no known cases in which internal organs of a burned corpse were damaged more severely than the outer parts."

John D DeHaan, a highly regarded American criminalist and "the chief god of fire investigation" until his death in 2022, wrote in *Science & Justice* (1999) about "the mythology of 'spontaneous human combustion'."

We could list a thousand more SHC repudiations. Orthodoxy vehemently damns SHC as a surrealistic, preposterous fantasy. There is – can be – no fire fatality that meets the historical criteria for SHC. It has value only as fictional fodder for tabloids and to confirm a believer's unsceptical gullibility.

ELKE WETZIG / CREATIVE COMMONS



LEFT: Lester Adelson rejected "the overheated concept of spontaneous human combustion". **BELOW:** Modern SHC sceptics include (clockwise from top left) John D DeHaan, Elayne Pope, Joe Nickell and Mark Benecke.

"SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION OF THE BODY CANNOT OCCUR, AND NO GOOD PURPOSE CAN BE SERVED BY DISCUSSING IT"

Unless…

Unless these quoted experts are wrong. Perish the thought?

As Fort observed in *Wild Talents* (chapter XIII): "as in every other field of phenomena, one comes upon cases that are irreconcilables."

For your consideration, then, we submit six contrariwise cases that we have personally investigated – cases that we find irreconcilable with mainstream fire science, per circumstances and criteria imposed by the naysayers themselves.

MARY 'CINDER WOMAN' REESER

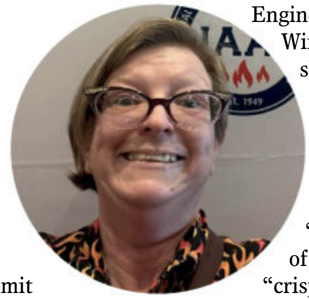
"Hoax! Bodies don't burn this way! I do not for a single second buy the overheated concept of spontaneous human combustion." – Dr Lester Adelson, medical examiner in the 1980s for Cuyahoga County, Ohio, upon viewing photographs of humans-to-ashes.

Around 4.20am on 2 July 1951, an unexpected sweet aroma awakens landlady Pansy Carpenter in her Allamanda Apartments in St Petersburg, Florida. She investigates, finds nothing amiss, and returns to bed.

Less than four hours later, a Western Union messenger arrives with a telegram for tenant Mary Reeser. Pansy takes it, walks the hallway to Mary's apartment and knocks on her door. An early riser, Mary does not answer. Pansy grasps the door knob and screams. It is hot. Two painters across the street, Albert Delnet and LP Clements, respond to her cry. They force open Mary's door and gasp. St Petersburg's police department (SPPD) and fire department (SPFD) are soon on-scene to find a befuddling sight.

Overnight, the 5ft 4in (1.6m), 175lb (79kg), cigarette-smoking, 67-year-old Pennsylvania widow temporarily residing in Florida became the centrepiece for what witnesses describe as weird, macabre, unbelievable, hair-bristling and like something out of the Middle Ages.[5]

The chair in which her son, Dr Richard Reeser Jr, had seen her sitting in at nine o'clock the previous evening is now little more than coiled springs. Beneath the chair, a hole in the wall-to-wall rug. An end table beside the chair, disintegrated. Newspapers within arm's length of the chair, intact (newsprint will auto-ignite at 446°F/230°C.) SPFD Engine 4 firemen Nelson Aters and Winthrop 'Buddy' Standish start shovelling up the debris.



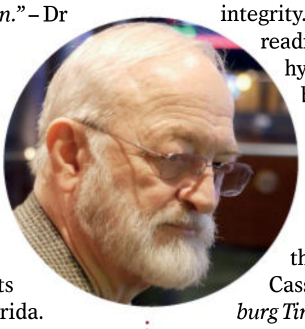
ELAYNE POPE

And what of Mary herself? Inside her "Circle of Death" lay a few pieces of vertebræ; something that resembles liver; a skull said to be "shrunk uniformly to the size of an orange" or "a teacup"; and "crisp ash". Just outside the circle's radius is a "wholly untouched left foot still wearing its slipper".

Notified of his mother's demise, Dr Reeser rushes to Allamanda. SPPD refuse him access. Frustrated, he has to wait outside for limited information.

Total weight of the 'body' shovelled up, bagged, and taken to the morgue: less than 10lb (4.5kg)

Cigarette-fire fatalities occur thousands of times annually and victims retain their body integrity. Should cigarette mishaps readily and frequently evolve into hyper-localised infernos that burn smokers to ashes, would not such scenes be commonplace?

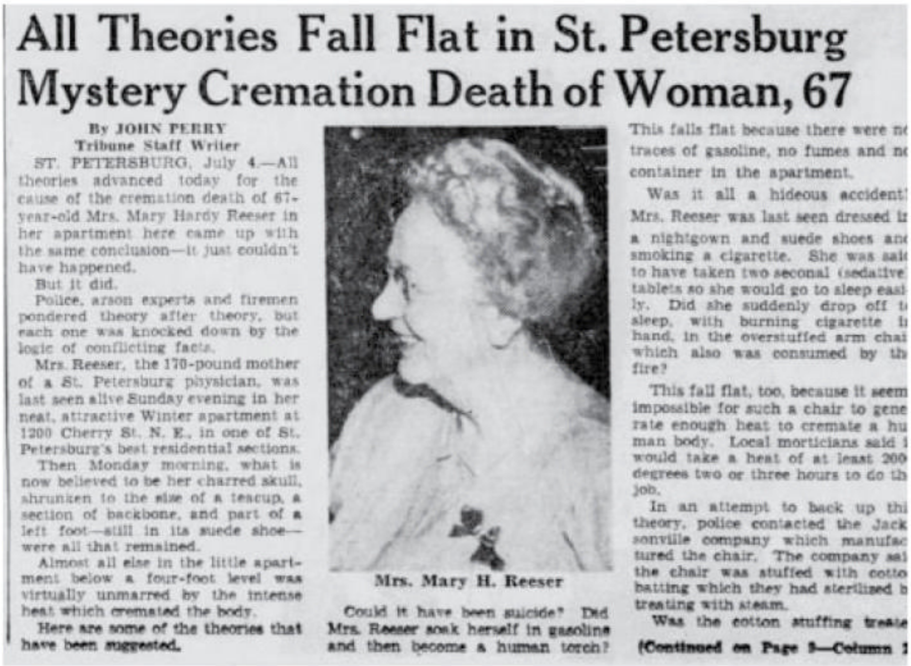


SGERBIC / CREATIVE COMMONS

This fire is different. It becomes front-page news.

"This fire is a curious thing," SPPD detective chief Cass Burgess tells the *St Petersburg Times* (5 July 1951). "I've been deluged by letters and phone calls offering solutions to the problems facing us."

The *Tampa Tribune* (4 July 1951) reports



All Theories Fall Flat in St. Petersburg Mystery Cremation Death of Woman, 67

By JOHN PERRY
Tribune Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG, July 4.—All theories advanced today for the cause of the cremation death of 67-year-old Mrs. Mary Hardy Reeser in her apartment here came up with the same conclusion—it just couldn't have happened.

But it did.

Police, arson experts and firemen pondered theory after theory, but each one was knocked down by the logic of conflicting facts.

Mrs. Reeser, the 170-pound mother of a St. Petersburg physician, was last seen alive Sunday evening in her neat, attractive Winter apartment at 1200 Cherry St. N. E., in one of St. Petersburg's best residential sections.

Then Monday morning, what is now believed to be her charred skull, shrunken to the size of a teacup, a section of backbone, and part of a left foot—still in its suede shoe—were all that remained.

Almost all else in the little apartment below a four-foot level was virtually unmarred by the intense heat which cremated the body.

Here are some of the theories that have been suggested.

Mrs. Mary H. Reeser

Could it have been suicide? Did Mrs. Reeser soak herself in gasoline and then become a human torch?

This falls flat because there were n traces of gasoline, no fumes and n container in the apartment.

Was it all a hideous accident Mrs. Reeser was last seen dressed i a nightgown and suede shoes an smoking a cigarette. She was sai to have taken two seconal (sedative tablets so she would go to sleep easi ly. Did she suddenly drop off t sleep, with burning cigarette i hand, in the overstuffed arm chai which also was consumed by th fire?

This fall flat, too, because it seem impossible for such a chair to gene rate enough heat to cremate a hu man body. Local morticians said i would take a heat of at least 200 degrees two or three hours to do th job.

In an attempt to back up thi theory, police contacted the Jack sonville company which manufac tured the chair. The company sai the chair was stuffed with cotto batting which they had sterilized b treating with steam.

Was the cotton stuffing treate

(Continued on Page 3—Column 1

LEFT: Front page of the *Tampa Tribune* (5 July 1951) declaring Reeser's death "just couldn't have happened." **BELOW:** The small "circle of fire" in which Mary Reeser, her chair and end table appeared to have burned.

"There was no odour of burning flesh." This fact alone, speaks to oddity.

It also ignites a nationwide firestorm of public curiosity and speculation.

A dropped cigarette; two Seconal sleeping tablets; inflammable nightgown fabric; flammable furniture; kerosene; napalm; lightning; thermite bombs; magnesium and phosphorus; a ball of fire; suicide; kidnapping and burning her off-site with debris returned to the initial crime scene; even murder-arson by her son. All are discounted.

For cause of death, acting coroner Edward Silk writes "third-degree burns" on the widow's Death Certificate. It's an absurd mischaracterisation, since her burns extended deep beyond third-degree muscle tissue burns and utterly destroyed her skeleton.

Enter Dr Wilton Marion Krogman, vacationing in nearby Bradenton. A professor at the University of Pennsylvania and known as "the bone doctor" because of his world-renowned expertise as a physical anthropologist, Krogman had conducted many cadaver-burning experiments. Only after 12 hours uninterrupted in a retort at 3000°F/1650°C had he succeeded, he said, in calcinating completely a human skeleton. Even then, he wrote, bones were "completely recognisable as a human" and never "ashed or 'powdered'."

Knowing that 3000°F is twice the temperature most structure fires attain and 50% hotter than lava oozing from volcanoes, he takes a professional's interest in this incinerated woman in a St Pete apartment. She promptly perplexes this expert on burned bodies.

"In 1951 I ran into a case which for sheer horror and bizarreness beat anything in my experience," he wrote for *Pageant* magazine (Oct 1952). "I learned then the pertinent details," he continued, "becoming more and more baffled as the story unfolded."

Krogman listed its puzzlements: 1) extent of reduction of body; 2) localisation of heat; 3) time available; 4) absence of noxious smell; 5) alleged shrunken head; 6) affront to common sense; 7) and a "monotonously consistent pattern which almost gives the lie to mere coincidence" because he knew Mary echoed rare accounts ascribed by some medical professionals to, gasp, SHC.

"I have posed the problem to myself again and again, and I always end up rejecting it in theory – but facing it in apparent fact!" he exclaimed about this peculiar fire. "Were I living in the Middle Ages I'd mutter something about 'black magic'."

A month passes with no incontestable evidence for plausible cause. Then, spontaneously, an announcement: the cause is, surprise, a cigarette-ignited chair fire.

"No! No! Not the comfy chair!" to recall a classic Monty Python line.

St Petersburg Police Department (SPPD) will not officially accept this determination. After almost 30 years, the case was "open" they told me in 1980; and so it was well into the 21st century.

Might Krogman himself find this proffered cigarette-chair explanation sensible, we wondered? We made several requests to meet and discuss the Reeser case with him. He rejected every one until, in 1975, he granted an interview that would focus on his illustrious career in anthropology. We eagerly accepted the opportunity, hoping that in the intervening decades he perchance had found his answer to Mary's death and might share it.

Krogman regaled us with recollections of a storied career in forensic anthropology, including collaboration with famed special agent Eliot Ness.[6] We eventually managed to ease him towards his 1951 bewilderment over the Reeser case, about which he had said "some things are improbable, but *nothing* is impossible."

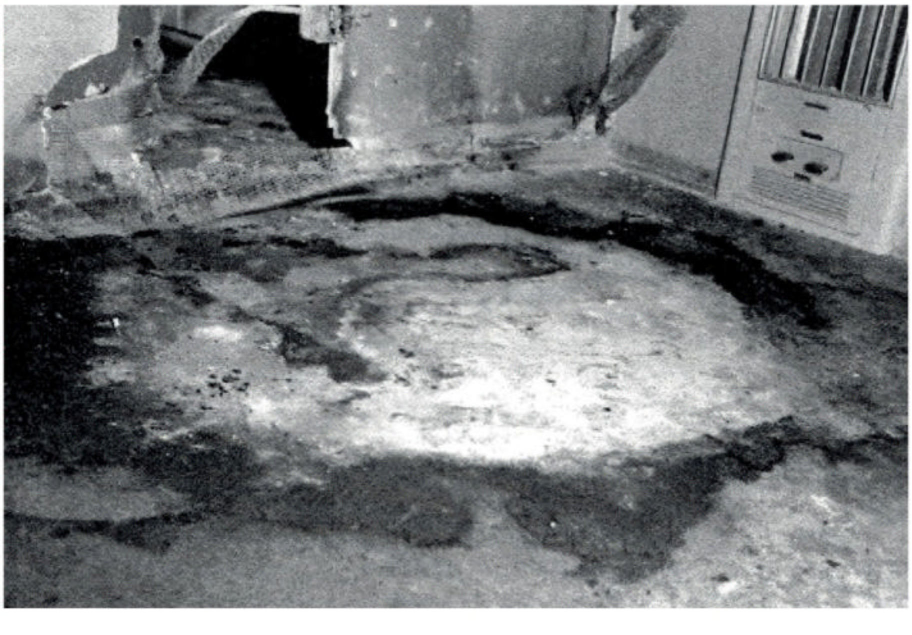
We were unprepared for the shocking surprise he sprung about this already shocking case.

"My feeling about the Reeser case is, the set-up in her apartment was staged," he declared.[7] "And this is my professional opinion: in my opinion those who saw the bones – the remains – were not competent a) to say they were human, and b) to say they *were* those of Mrs. Reeser. It's all circumstantial. Now I'm not suggesting there's a plant. I'm just saying..."

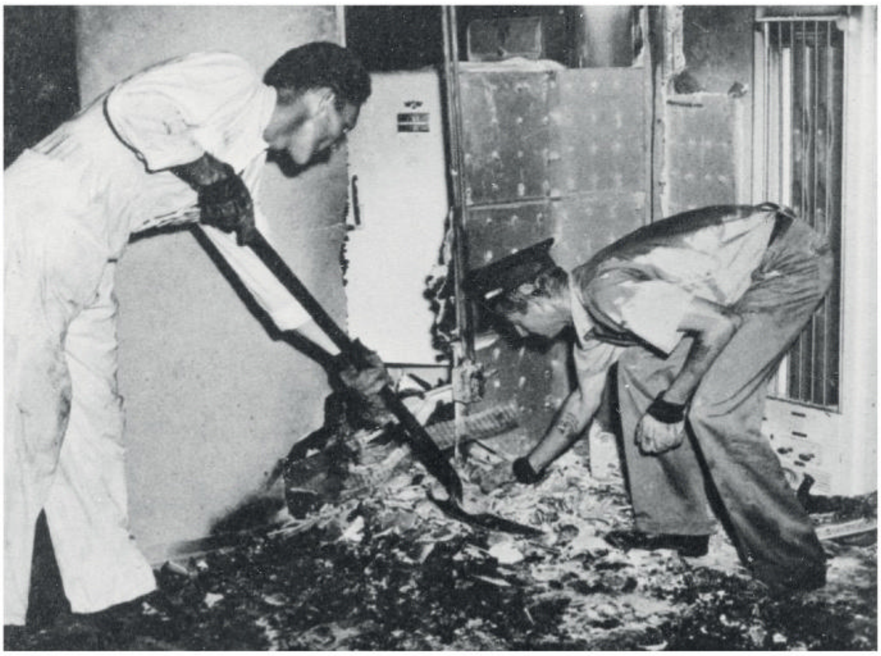
What? Our jaw smashing figuratively onto his desktop must, to this day, reverberate through the cosmos.

Facts that so baffled him and others in 1951 and left the case "open" for decades, are now explained *not even* by a lit cigarette dropping into a drowsy woman's lap but, rather… as a *ruse?*

Was Krogman joking? Testing our gullibility? No, he was quite serious. (Notice that he corrected himself, changing "bones" to "remains.")



LARRY E ARNOLD



LARRY E ARNOLD

LARRY E ARNOLD

TOP: SPFD firemen Nelson Aters (l) and Buddy Standish (r) shovel up Mary Reeser's 'body' from her Allamanda Apartments sitting room floor. **ABOVE:** Renowned forensic anthropologist Dr WM Krogman took a professional interest in The Cinder Woman. **BELOW:** On display at the morgue are Reeser's black satin slipper, pieces of vertebræ and a stated "shrunken" skull, all weighing less than 10lb (4.5kg).

This meant the good professor now admonished everyone to disbelieve what *he* had written about the event at Allamanda Apartments; not to recognise the training, competence, reputations, and plain hard work of scores of on-the-scene investigators and technicians in 1951; to believe a mortician could not differentiate a human foot in a slipper from that of a mannequin. Then where was the widow herself? Who could have staged this? And why?

At no time previously had anyone involved in the Reeser case – himself included – offered a nanogram of evidence for the scenario he now proposed.

Fort captured Krogman's rationale-flipping perfectly in *Wild Talents* (ch. III): "There was the usual searching investigation that precedes forgetfulness."

We prefer to rely on those who found no need to rethink their first-hand observations at Mary's apartment that July morning.

"They didn't know *what* they had there!" recounted SPPD patrolman Walter Tipton, whose task was to secure the site and prevent Dr Reeser's entry.

Buddy Standish's fireman son, Joseph, told us his father was a man of few words. For the Reeser fire his father consistently chose this one: "Bizarre!"

We interviewed Buddy's fellow shoveller, Nelson Aters. Precise and laconic, Aters used a few more words than did his colleague: "I believe the woman died by spontaneous human combustion." [8]

Any evidence that could answer *precisely* how Mary died is buried with the few pounds of her anatomy at West Chestnut Hill Cemetery south of Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania.

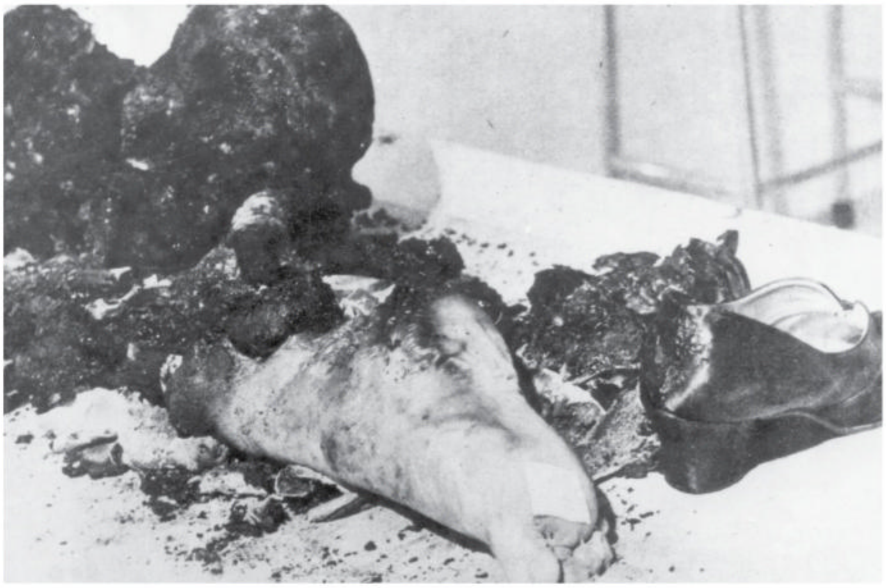
However: photographs of her death, from apartment to morgue, predate Photoshop and are not hoaxes. They don't misrepresent. They, along with reports and first-responders' testimonies in our inch-thick case file, provide indisputable verification that Mary Hardy Reeser did burn in the very way that the sceptics deny.

PHYSICIAN JOHN IRVING BENTLEY

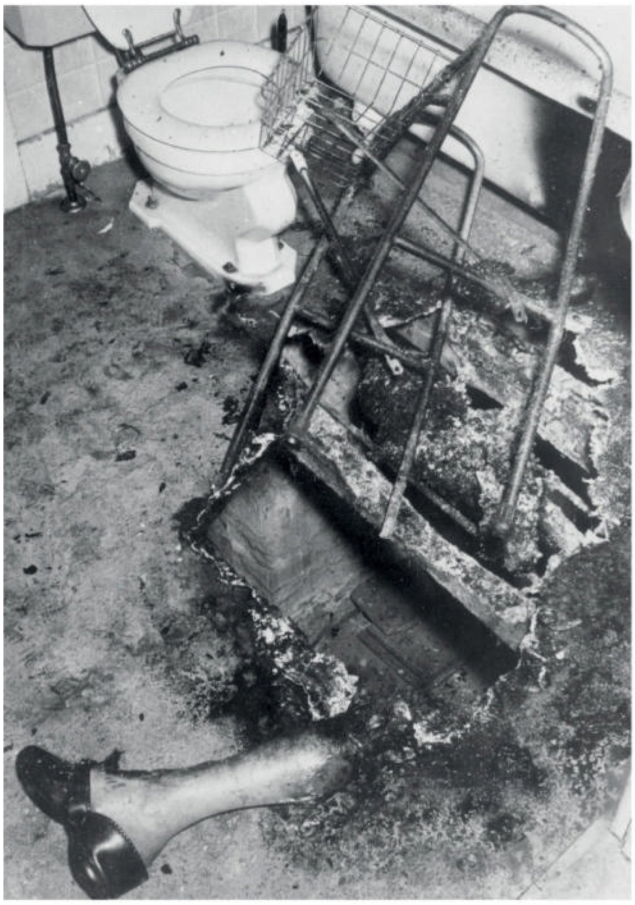
"One of my favorite cases is that of Dr J Irving Bentley. It's a case where we know what the ignition was. In Bentley's case, hot ashes from his pipe for sure!" – Joe Nickell on The Travel Channel's *Out of the World – World's Most Unexplained* (S1E3), 18 Oct 2020.

Physician John Irving Bentley poses profound puzzlement to everyone who enters his home in Coudersport, northcentral Pennsylvania, on the morning of 5 December 1966.

Overnight, the tall 92-year-old – a beloved and ambulatory-impaired country doctor – burned himself through his bathroom floor. Misinformation about the remarkable event begins almost immediately. His hometown newspaper, *The Potter Enterprise*, will reveal two days later his "tragic end" to townsfolk with a front-page obit that begins "The charred body of Dr J Irving Bentley,



LARRY E ARNOLD



LARRY E ARNOLD

92, was discovered in a smouldering fire Monday morning in his bathroom…"

There are two journalistic errors in that opening sentence.

First in that morning to read the gas meter in Bentley's basement is Don Gosnell, also a volunteer fireman, who notices "a strange, sickening sweet odour" and wispy smoke but sees neither a smouldering fire nor a charred body when he makes his dismaying discovery. What he does see is what he thinks is a mannequin leg with a leather slipper lying tangential to a 2.5x3ft (76x94cm) hole in the doctor's bathroom floor.

Until, that is, he leans down for a closer look and realises he's looking at half a *human* leg.

He flees the house in horror, running down Main Street to tell his co-workers that "*D. Bentley's burnt up!*"

He returns to the scene, but refuses to re-enter the house. Too frightful, too unsettling, too unnerving, Gosnell tells us. As news begins to spread and fellow firefighters arrive, no one can believe what he tells them is inside… until each person enters and confirms that what Gosnell describes is true.

On exposed water pipes under the linoleum-covered floorboards is Bentley's head, burned so badly some first-responders do not recognise it as such. One patella falls onto a basement post beneath a nearly severed oak floor beam. The remainder of his 180lb (84kg) body: a 5x14in (13x36cm) cone of powdery ash on the basement's earthen floor. And *no* organs.[9] (We challenge forensic anthropologist Elayne Pope to find a stab- or gunshot-wound in Bentley's mound of ashes, as she says is possible for her to do with any fire-ravaged corpse.)

Enamel paint on the bathtub directly above the hole's perimeter does not blister. Not a scorch mark mars the ceiling directly above the hole, a ceiling so low we could – did – touch it with our up-stretched arm. His aluminium walker, intact, tilts askew over the death-hole. (Aluminium melts at 1218°F/659°C; when alloyed, as low as 848°F/453°C.)

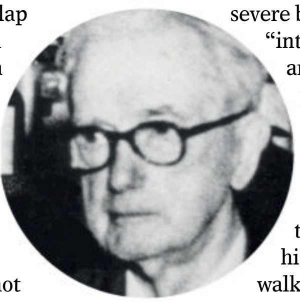
About that death-hole. At a conventional fire, burn-throughs in flooring result from lightweight building construction material, especially modern Oriented Strand Board (OSB) sheeting formulated with wax, resins and adhesives; radiated heat from furniture afire atop the hole; and, possibly, a poured accelerant like kerosene or gasoline.[10] None of these conditions exist in Bentley's bathroom.

An oddly sweet aroma permeates the physician's residence. Gosnell notices it on entering the hallway, giving the fireman no cause to suspect human flesh has burned on the premises. A neighbour living across the street, Linda Russell, tells us she smelled an unexpected aroma at about 6:30 that morning; she compared it to barbequed savoury steak.

AS NEWS SPREADS AND FELLOW FIREFIGHTERS ARRIVE, NO ONE CAN BELIEVE WHAT HE TELLS THEM IS INSIDE

Bentley smoked a pipe, found neatly placed in its holder next to his chair. This fact challenges the belief by SHC sceptics that he had dropped it into his lap and it was the external ignition source and hence this was not a case of, gasp, SHC.

His cotton robe, undergarment, and single slipper do not provide the necessary fuel load to explain this localised conflagration that rivals, indeed exceeds, a cremation. Coudersport's firefighters are not the only ones who recognise this fact.



COURTESY OF POTTER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Pastor Ken Lewis knew the house in which Bentley lived was a century old when he bought it in 1970. "As with all these older homes," he explained when he gave us access to the building, "the timbers are very, very dry. As a builder and a carpenter… the *amazing* thing would be that when this fire started, *somehow it didn't continue to burn the house down!* … That, to me, is the phenomenon that has to be explained. To my mind, the *big mystery* is how a man could have been completely consumed in this size of a fire and the house not go along with it!"

BELOW: Dr John Irving Bentley. **LEFT:** The terrible scene in Dr Bentley's bathroom, with a human leg the only portion of the doctor's body immediately visible to firefighters.

Unlike the SHC deniers, we have journeyed several times to Coudersport (each a 360-mile/580-km trip) to speak to first-responders and all others we could locate, including next-of-kin, who knew Bentley and the facts of his bizarre burning.[11]

We have not misrepresented its details or fabricated false evidence. Unlike some others.

For example, Potter County coroner Herman Mosch indicated that he performed an autopsy on Bentley's scant remains. For cause of death, he wrote on the Certificate of Death, "asphyxiation and 90% burning of body" during "1/2 hr" .

Mosch's 30-minute timeframe is comical guesswork. Establishing asphyxiation in the absence of trachea, oesophagus or lungs is impossible. As Potter County deputy coroner John Dec said to us, Bentley suffered "98, 99% burning. How do you autopsy ashes?"

Add one more example to Fort's tally in *Wild Talents* (Ch. XIII) that: "There are thousands of inquests at which testimonies are proper stories."

Enter America's professional 'skeptic' and self-proclaimed "Detective of the Impossible," Joe Nickell.

To quote Fort again (*The Book of the Damned*, Ch. VIII): "A whopper is coming."

Nickell and co-author John F Fischer in their 1992 book, *Mysterious Realms: Probing Paranormal, Historical and Forensic Enigmas*, disparage the case of clothing salesman Jack Angel who, we submit, survived severe burns medically diagnosed as "internal in origin" (**FT39:12-15**), and then turn to Bentley: "… a pipe smoker who frequently dropped smouldering ashes on his clothing. Burns on the bathroom floor suggested this had happened a final time, and Dr Bentley had made his way with his aluminium walker to the bathroom where he vainly attempted to extinguish the flames. That he had shed his robe, found smouldering in the bathtub, demonstrated that the source of combustion was *external*, not internal as SHC proponents imagine."[12]

Such precision; such exactitude. A robe ignited, Nickell decisively declares, by "hot ashes from his pipe *for sure!*"

Nickell and Fisher close their SHC chapter rather haughtily: "As in other cases

CULVER
BENTLEY
ESTHER J.
1872 — 1916
J.L.M.D.
1874 — 1966
SUSAN A.
1888 — 1959

LARRY E ARNOLD

LEFT: The author (l) with Pastor Lewis (r), owner of the Bentley house, at the country doctor's grave. **BELOW:** Portrait of fireman George Mott.

of the alleged phenomena that we have investigated, a plausible, naturalistic cause was readily found. It is lamentable that proponents of SHC seem repeatedly unable to discover such evidence themselves, or to appreciate it once it is presented to them." [13]

Yikes, did this writer get slapped down?

Their assured "naturalistic cause" to resolve Bentley's burning has a flaw; three, actually.

Flaw 1: What the sceptical duo don't address is why his robe, dotted with spark holes, never before erupted into flaming combustion until this singular night to consume, this time only, the helpless doctor. Maybe his nurse, Mary Nicholson, had laundered it in gasoline that very day? Perhaps it's just another of those meddlesome, nitpicking issues of no consequence.

Can you guess the other two flaws? Answers, later.

FIREMAN GEORGE MOTT

"In forensic practice, there are no known cases in which internal organs of a burned corpse were damaged more severely than the outer parts." – forensic biologist Mark Benecke, Ph.D., explaining what makes SHC impossible (*Skeptical Inquirer*, Mar/Apr 1998).

For fire investigator Anthony Morette and fellow firefighters, a mystery both marvellous and macabre befell their friend, retired fireman George Mott, in his bedroom in late March 1986 in Crown Point, New York.

We undertook three 800-mile (1,288-km) round trips to interview first-responders and all others we could locate, including family, who knew Mr Mott and the facts of his unnerving demise. Had we not made the effort, the details of this death would, like Dr Bentley's, remain largely unknown beyond next-of-kin; and in Bentley's case, not even to kin.)

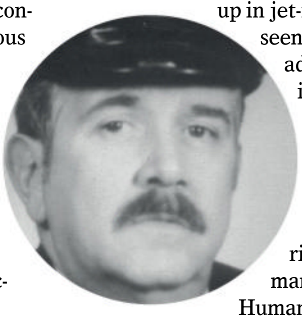
George served with Ticonderoga's Defiance Fire Department for about 15 years. Morette, Essex County's fire investigator, had worked alongside him. Mott was intelligent, methodical, orderly and, as Morette would tell us, had stopped smoking in the mid-1970s and took care of his health, enjoying the companionship of his beloved grandchildren.

"HE BURNED FROM THE INSIDE OUT, NOT THE OUTSIDE IN. THAT'S SPONTANEOUS HUMAN COMBUSTION!"

"He was one hell of a good fireman," and fanatical about eliminating fire hazards, Morette stressed.[14] "Mott was concerned about fire. He was nervous as hell about fires. He knew his business!"

This included Mott's inflexible rule banning cigarette-smoking; no one, including his son Kendall, was allowed to smoke inside his home.

These traits paint a portrait of *the least likely* victim of an accidental fire or suicide by fire.



COURTESY TICONDEROGA FIRE DEPARTMENT

Kendall goes to check on his dad on 26 March 1986 around 6pm. Something is awry, he senses; something is wrong, terribly wrong. "When I opened the door," he tells us, "it was warm inside. It was all dark. Very dark. I knew the minute I walked in, he was dead." [15]

Phone calls soon bring New York State Police and Crown Point Fire to Mott's isolated one-story cabin. When fire investigator Morette arrives, he walks into Mott's bedroom and sees a right leg – lower half only – lying on a partially burned mattress.

At the other end of the mattress is Mott's head. It was "grapefruit-size, maybe. It wasn't a normal skull," Morette affirms, then adds a detail that echoes the Mary Reeser case: "It should have exploded apart, you know, but somehow it didn't. It just seemed to shrink up. Just bizarre… It looked like a shrunken head."

The rest of Mott has disintegrated, burning through the mattress, bed springs, bed slats and floorboards to land in the dirt crawl space below as dry ashes. Here, Morette finds two small calcinated bone fragments that "crumpled to powder when I touched them… There was 3.5lb [1.6kg] left of him, and he was a 180lb [81kg] man!" (Cremation normally yields 6-8lb (2.7-3.6kg) of material to be raked out of the retort.)

Morette and his boss, Essex County Emergency-Preparedness Services director Robert Purdy, scour the tinderbox of a house for a cause and come up wanting. No gas leak; no electrical wiring faults; no lightning strike; no suicide by fire; no murder-arson; no plausible external ignition source.[16]

Yes, stick matches sit on an oxygen-enrichment machine inches from Mott's bed. They are not there to light a cigarette, as Joe Nickell has falsely claimed, saying Mott opted to smoke one that fateful March day after years of being a confirmed non-smoker. Rather, Mott uses them to light the furnace on the other side of his bedroom wall. Curiously this human-incinerating blaze fails to ignite the matches or the bedroom wall.

Absent again is the insufferably pungent odour of burned human flesh. "It seemed strange," Morette remarked. "It was kinda a sweetish smell, basically." In any way typical of a burned body? "Geez, no!" shot back the fire investigator.

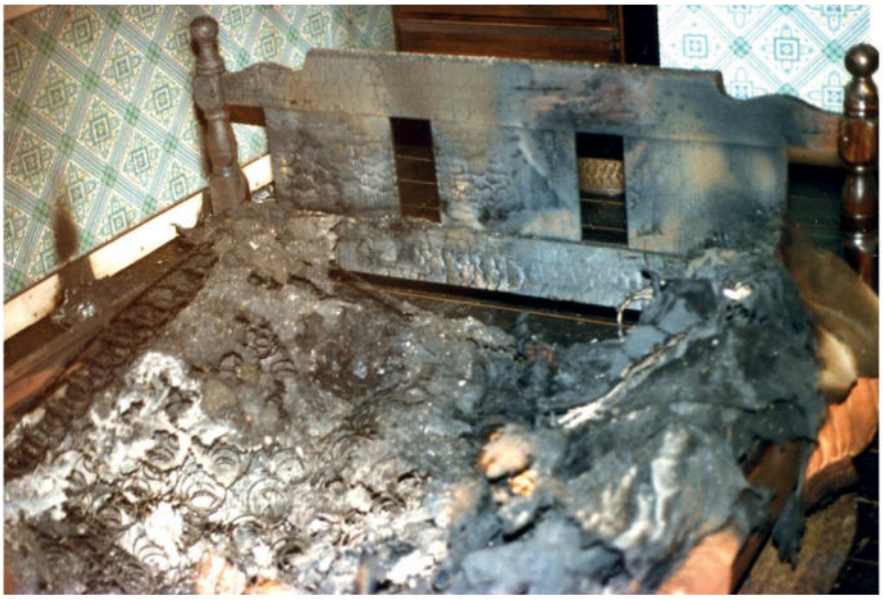
Purdy, a USAF airman 1st-Class during the Korean War, had seen servicemen burned up in jet-fuel infernos. "I've never seen *anything* like this!" he freely admitted about Mott's localised incineration.

We had full access to the fire scene after the removal of Mott's remains (ironically *re*-cremated at the Adirondack-Burlington Crematorium). It is a scene typifying many traits of classic Sudden Human Cremation and is arguably the best-documented case of its kind in the public record.[17]

Despite the fearsome thoroughness and isolation of this fire, New York Bureau of Crimes Investigation (BCI) officer John Beck was unwilling to contemplate SHC. He *knew* the fire's cause, he told us. A conventional cause, of course. Quite simply, Beck explained, an electrical arc had shot out of the outlet in Mott's bedroom and ignited the man's clothing. End of any 'mystery' for the BCI.

Frankly, we could not fathom a professional criminologist espousing this. We knew both Morette and Purdy had explored this possibility. To quote Purdy: "I took those outlets apart in my hand. There was no arcing. There was *none!* That was to 'close the book' for me." [18]

We also examined those three outlets when in Mott's bedroom and agree with Morette and Purdy: *No arcing on any cover*



LARRY E ARNOLD

LARRY E ARNOLD

TOP: George Mott's fiery deathbed. **ABOVE:** The "No Smoking" sign on Mott's front door didn't prevent what happened several feet away in March 1986.

plate or receptacle wiring. Also undamaged: the ceiling's white wallpaper directly above Mott's bed. As in similar cases, it was as if the direction for this fire and its heat was downwards.

What the BCI investigator looked at, we don't know, except a way to avoid looking at SHC.

For those who knew Mott and pondered rationally the scene he left behind, the answer to his flaming fate is unambiguous and unanimous.

Essex County fire investigator Anthony Morette: "As far as I'm concerned, the case is closed. He died of spontaneous combustion."

Essex County Emergency-Preparedness Services director Robert Purdy: "He burned from the inside out, not the outside in. That's spontaneous human combustion in *my* estimation. And *I* don't know what else!"

Son Kendall Mott: "He definitely died of a weird cause! There wasn't anything left of him. The family agrees with spontaneous human combustion."

New York fireman Mott joins Reeser and Bentley, whose burn-ups left behind external body parts – foot, half a leg with its foot, head (shrunken in two cases) – yet *wholly absent* internal organs.

Mark Benecke's criteria to disprove SHC – "no known cases" where internal organ destruction exceeds that of other body parts – is negated by these three cases, thus establishing the phenomenon he belittles and debunks. But Proper investigation, and the facts, would seem to reject Benecke's criteria for rejecting SHC

• *NEXT ISSUE: HOUSEWIVES IN FLAMES AND OTHER FIERY MYSTERIES...*

NOTES

1 Thomas H Bartholini, *Historiarum Anatomicarum Rariorum* (1654), Centuries I and II, chapter 70, pp.120-121. See also Bartholini, *Cista Medica Hafniensis* (1662), pp.392-393; and Bartholini, *De Luce Hominum et Brutorum Libri III. Novis rationibüs, & raris biftorus fecundùm illustrate* (1669) p.184.

2 See John Henry Cohausen's *Lumen novum Phosphoris accensum* (1717); Giuseppe Bianchini's *Parere sopra la cagione della morte della Signora Contessa Cornelia Zangari ne'Bandi Cesenate esposto in una lettera al Signor Ottolino Ottoliniy* (1731); Pierre-Aime Lair's *Essai sur les combustions humaines, produites par un long abus des liqueurs spiritueuses* (1808) and "On the Combustion of the Human Body, produced by the long and immoderate use of Spirituous Liquors" in *The Emporium of Arts & Sciences* (1812); Julia de Fontanelle's "Recherches chimiques et médicales sur les combustions humaines spontanées" in *Revue Medécin Française et Étrangère* (1828) and "On the Spontaneous Combustion of the Human Body" in *The Edinburgh New Philosophical Journal* (1828); Etoc Demazy's "Combustion humaine spontanée" in *Archives Générales de Médecine: Journal Publié par une Société de Médecins* (1830); Dr Joly's "Remarkable Case of Spontaneous Combustion" in *Journal des Connaissances Médico-chirurgicales* (Sept 1836); Dr Grabner-Maraschin's "Dissertation Médico-Légale sur les combustions Spontanées du Corps humain" in *Journal des Progres des Sciences et Institutions Médicales en Europe* (1829); Dr Hergt's "Ueber die Selbstverbrennung des menschlichen körpers" in *Annalen der Staatsarznerkunde* (1837); and Benjamin Frank's arduously titled *De Combustione Spontanea Humani Corporis, Commentatio Historica Physiologica et Medico-Forensis de Sententia Gratiosi Medicorum Ordinis in Certamine Literio civium Academiae Georgiae Augustae (1841)* to cite a few.

3 Strong, *A Treatise on Medical Jurisprudence* (1855).

4 Elayne J Pope, "Burned Beyond Recognition: Attempts to Destroy Evidence of Death," *American Academy of Forensic Sciences, XI* (2005).

5 Larry Arnold, *Ablaze! The Mysterious Fires of Spontaneous Human Combustion*, (1995), pp.73-91 .

6 Larry Arnold, "The Bone Detective," *Susquehanna Monthly Magazine* (July 1992), pp.28-29.

7 Wilton Marion Krogman, personal exchange, 2 Mar 1982.

8 Nelson Aters, pers. comm., 30 July 2001. Walter Tipton, pers. comm., 31 July 2001; Joseph Standish, pers. comm., 11 Aug 2023.

9 Arnold, *Ablaze!, pp.1-12.*

10 Dan McIntyre, Dan, FJ Spinelli and Thomas Williams, *Burn Patterns and Holes in Floors – Be Careful!*, undated.

11 Larry Arnold, "The Flaming Fate of Dr John Irving Bentley," *Pursuit* (Fall 1976), pp.75-79; "Human Fireballs," *Science Digest* (Oct 1981), pp.88-91; "The Flaming Fate of Dr Bentley," *Fate*, (April 1977), pp.66-72.

12 Joe Nickell and John F Fischer, *Mysterious Realms: Probing Paranormal, Historical and Forensic Enigmas* (1992), p.169.

13 Ibid., p.173.

14 Anthony Morette, Anthony, pers. comms., 24 May, 21 & 22 June, 13 & 20 July 1986; 11 Sept 1987.

15 Kendall Mott, pers. comms., 12 & 29 Jan, 2 Feb 1995.

16 Anthony Morette, as above. Robert Purdy, pers. Comms., 6 Dec 1994; 27 Jan, 3 Feb 1995.

17 Arnold, *Ablaze!*, pp.393-411.

18 Robert Purdy, pers. comm., 27 Jan 1995.

➾ **LARRY E ARNOLD** has spent decades conducting archival research and first-responder interviews and collecting photographic evidence. This resulted in his book *Ablaze! The Mysterious Fires of Spontaneous Human Combustion* (1995). Regarded by some as the world's leading advocate for SHC, he also been described as a pseudo-scientist, "mystery monger" and "world-class fool". Now in post-production, his appearance in *The UnXplained with William Shatner* will hopefully depict honestly the mystery of SHC.

THE COLOUR OF MAGIC

As a major exhibition devoted to the work of Ithell Colquhoun comes to Tate Britain, it seems that the works of this long-forgotten artist may show the route to enlightenment, as LISA GLEDHILL discovers.

MAN RAY TRUST / ADAGP / CENTRE POMPIDOU, MNAM-CCI, DIST. GRANDPALAISRMN / GUY CARRARD

LEFT: *Ithell Colquhoun*, by Man Ray, c.1932.
FACING PAGE: Ithell Colquhoun, *Earth Process*, 1940.

Colour provides an avenue into ‘worlds’, or spheres-of-being, other than that recognised by everyday perception”.[1] So said the artist and occultist Ithell Colquhoun, summarising the colour-theory of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. She never quite managed to be a member of that well-known secret society, but its ideas infused her world; and on its foundations, she built her own transcendent magical visions.

Margaret Ithell Colquhoun was a child of the Empire, born in India in 1906, to British parents – whom she never quite forgave for relocating her to unglamorous England before she’d turned two. Her parents were distant and often entirely absent, with little concern for her formal education, so young Margaret was free to follow the curriculum of her imagination. The India she would never see became an exoticised locus of magic and wisdom. At the same time, visits to her mother’s distant relatives in Ireland brought her into contact with the last flickerings of the Celtic Twilight – the romantic literary and artistic movement fuelled by Irish mythology and fairy-lore, and personified in WB Yeats, himself a prominent ritual magician. When she was 17 she discovered the bad boy of the British occult scene, Aleister Crowley, by illicitly reading sensational stories in the *Sunday Express* while sitting on the loo.[2] In her late teens, now calling herself Ithell,[3] she was writing plays based on mediæval alchemical texts and hoovering up all the information she could find on hermeticism.

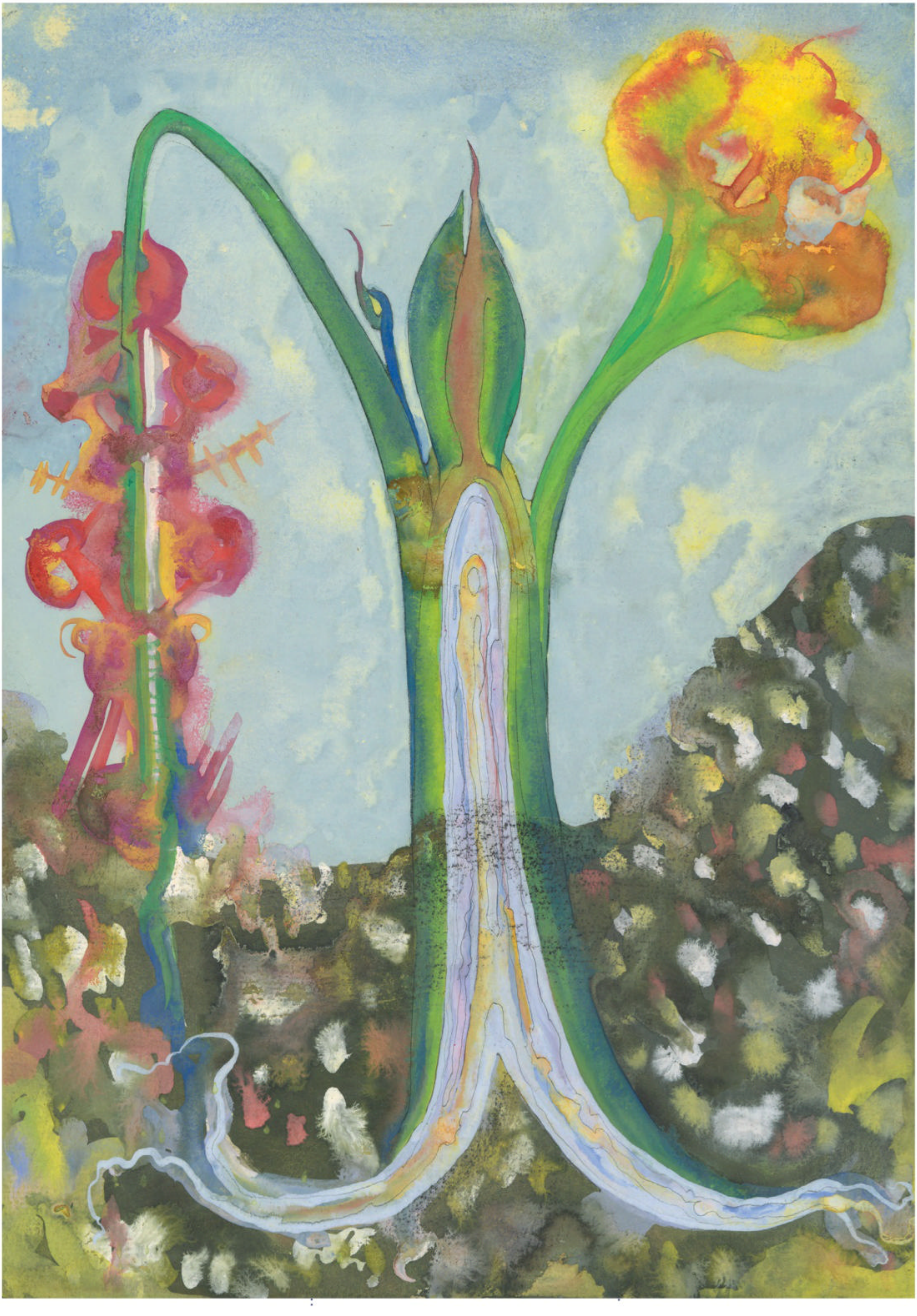
Her talent for art led her to study at The Slade School in London. No doubt she chose it for its high reputation and its even-handed treatment of male and female students, but also, just possibly, because it was the place where Golden Dawn founder-members Mina Bergson and Annie Horniman had met and studied. She joined The Quest Society, an offshoot of The Theosophical Society, and began writing for various occult publications. Through Quest, Colquhoun met Edward Garstin, an expert on alchemy who turned out to be her distant cousin. He was also a leading member of the much more secretive Alpha et Omega, a group formed from the shattered remains of the original Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn by the magus Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers (see **FT456:30-37**). Cousin Eddie introduced young Ithell to the Kabbalah, which turned out to be literally life-changing. He also tried to introduce her to Alpha et Omega, telling her “We work largely with colour – as an artist, you would find it very much in your line.”[4] Unfortunately, Ithell failed to impress the order’s leader, Isabel Morgan Boyd, and was never admitted, though she went on to obtain a thorough understanding of the Golden Dawn system, possibly through access to Cousin Eddie’s library.

VISITS TO IRELAND BROUGHT HER INTO CONTACT WITH THE LAST FLICKERINGS OF THE CELTIC TWILIGHT

Garstin’s comment on working with colour must be a reference to the Golden Dawn teachings that colours are in themselves forces.[5] They are not just symbols, they contain a power which, if used in the correct way, can initiate a change in consciousness and give access to intangible realities. Colours literally are magic. The ‘Secret Chiefs’ who gave the Golden Dawn their rituals insisted that only strong pure colours were acceptable. Using the wrong shade could be disastrous,[6] so it’s lucky that their revelations coincided with the mass production of bold synthetic colours in a wide spectrum of hues, sold inexpensively to artists. Colquhoun’s awareness of the power of colour is there in her work from an early stage, though at first she used it in quite a typical way. An art school prize-winning painting of *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* spreads assertive red across the foreground, while her *Death of the Virgin* is framed in tranquil blue. In her more informal work, for example her series of mural designs drafted to decorate art school parties, her use of colour is more self-consciously magical, with zodiacal and alchemical symbols painted in the shades specified in the grimoires she was reading.

Thanks to a family trust fund, Colquhoun was in the happy position of not needing to earn a living, so after art school she studied in Paris. She became involved with the emerging Surrealist movement and for a while she exhibited with that group in the UK and abroad. An interest in architecture led to work with the artist and theorist Amédée Ozenfant, who taught that colour can not only change how you experience a building but, through contrast, can actually change the form of that building. Ozenfant’s friend and colleague Le Corbusier went further, developing a palette of 63 colours, each with its own special function and psychological effect.[7] This list, similar to a magical table of correspondences, along with his assertion that “Colour is an incredibly effective triggering tool” must have felt very familiar to Colquhoun.

Through surrealism, Colquhoun dis-



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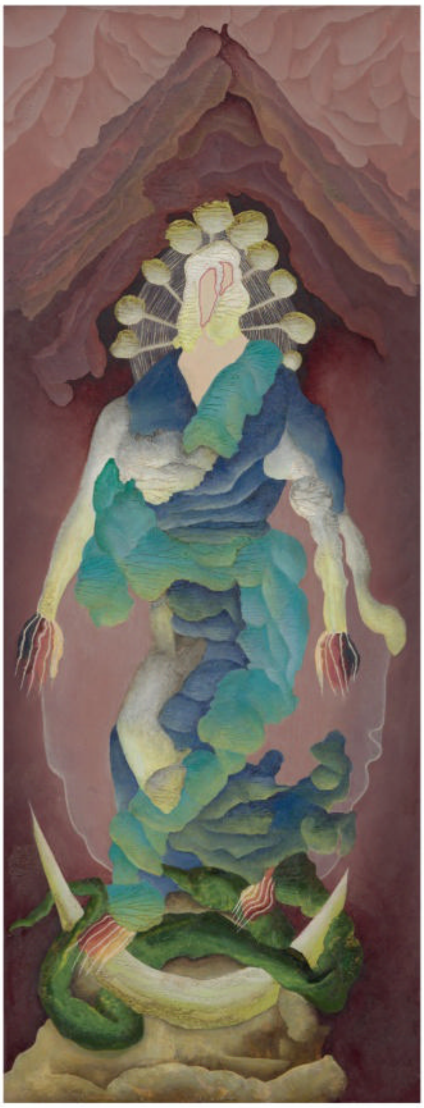

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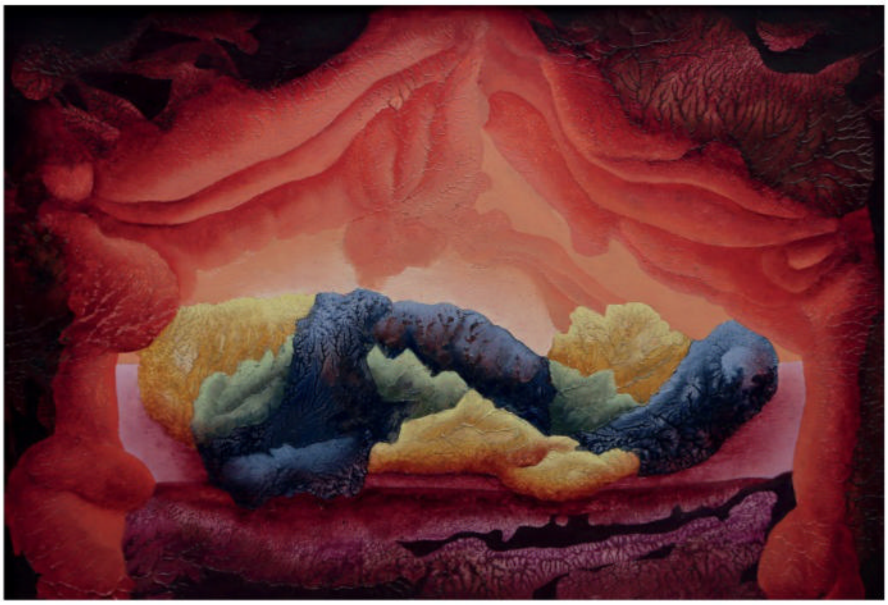

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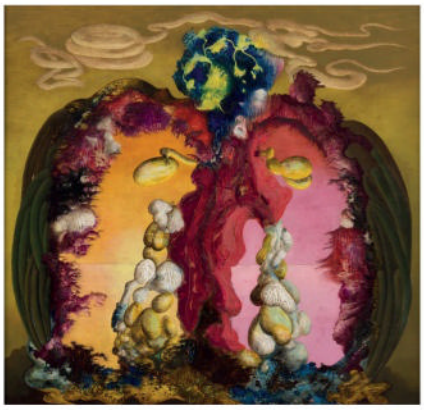
LEFT: Ithell Colquhoun, *Attributes of the Moon*, 1947. **ABOVE**: Ithell Colquhoun, *Alcove*, 1946. **BELOW**: Ithell Colquhoun, *Gorgon*, 1946.



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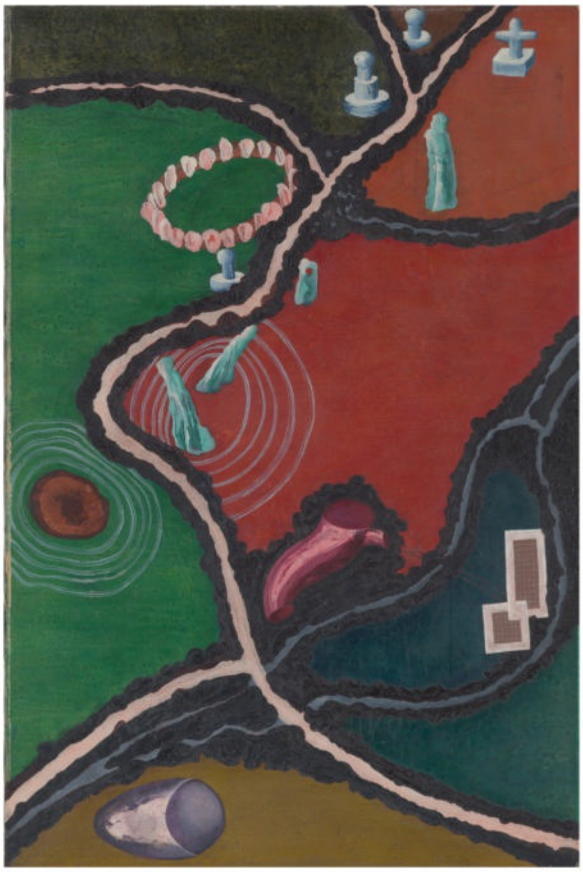
covered a range of 'automatic' techniques which became a keystone of her work. The theory was that by surrendering conscious control of the initial creative process, hidden psychological truths would emerge. Colquhoun went further, seeing automatism as a way of connecting with forces beyond normal perception, which might even have prophetic power.[8] The technique she used most was something we've probably all tried in primary school – dripping blobs of colour onto a sheet of paper, squidging another paper on top, then peeling it off to reveal a series of Rorschach-like splotches. Many of her best-known works such as *Gorgon* and *Alcove* began this way, and they revealed themselves to her as she worked them into finished pictures. Of course, Colquhoun chose which colours to begin with, so these were not truly random creations, but they may have been intentional magical workings aimed at connecting with specific energies.

Stone circles, leys and energy currents appear frequently in Colquhoun's art intended for public display, but she also kept up a steady output of very personal work. Tesseracts, crosses, and sexual imagery are repeated time and time again in vivid contrasting colours. In particular, one series of watercolour sketches from the early 1940s shows couples and sometimes thruples in opposing shades of red and blue having sex in dozens of positions. The intensity of repetition and choice of colour suggests that these were not simply an artist's working drawings or a private fantasy. They must represent some concentrated magical working, based on tantric or alchemical principles of weaving opposites into a unified and transcendent whole. There is also some similarity to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn's use of 'flashing tablets' – coloured symbols painted on strongly contrasting backgrounds, used to create a disorienting effect and allowing the operator to enter altered states. The impact is similar to 1960s Op Art or to that optical illusion where you stare at a red image on a green background then close your eyes and 'see' the same image with the colours reversed. Colquhoun's interest in these effects never waned and she was still writing knowledgeably about the Golden Dawn's use of colour in the late 1970s. Her surviving notes on hermeticism also stress the importance of precision, observation and repetition to improve the success of any working – it's a very scientific approach to magic, as well as one grounded in artistic best practice.

THEY MAY HAVE BEEN MAGICAL WORKINGS AIMED AT CONNECTING WITH SPECIFIC ENERGIES

From the mid-1950s to the mid 1960s Colquhoun spent more time writing than painting, but then her art gained a second wind, carrying her through another 20 years of prolific output. She branched out into collage and three-dimensional constructions made from old packaging and found objects. She began experimenting with gesso and enamel, all the time flitting between magically-inspired abstraction, surrealistic compositions and representational scenes. Sometimes these approaches overlapped, as in her 1976 painting of Notre Dame cathedral at Reims. Superficially, it harks back to her earlier architectural studies, but gesso angels push their way out from the textured surface, and the whole image is executed in shades of blue, the signature colour of Mary the Virgin – and also of Chesed, the sephiroth, signifying divine mercy on the Kabbalah tree of life. Colquhoun's most significant fusions of magic and colour appeared over the next two years, starting with her unique taro[9] deck. Instead of the traditional set of picture cards, she created 78 vivid images representing all the major and minor arcana by pouring, layering and pressing enamel paint onto paper. The work was intended as a tool for meditation as a route to enlightenment rather than for divination. The suits are linked by the colours of the four elements: red for fire, blue for water, yellow for air and a very dark purple for earth. The major arcana are coloured according to their affinities to the different elements. The resulting patterns, in Colquhoun's view, allowing a more direct and personal communion with the concepts embodied by the



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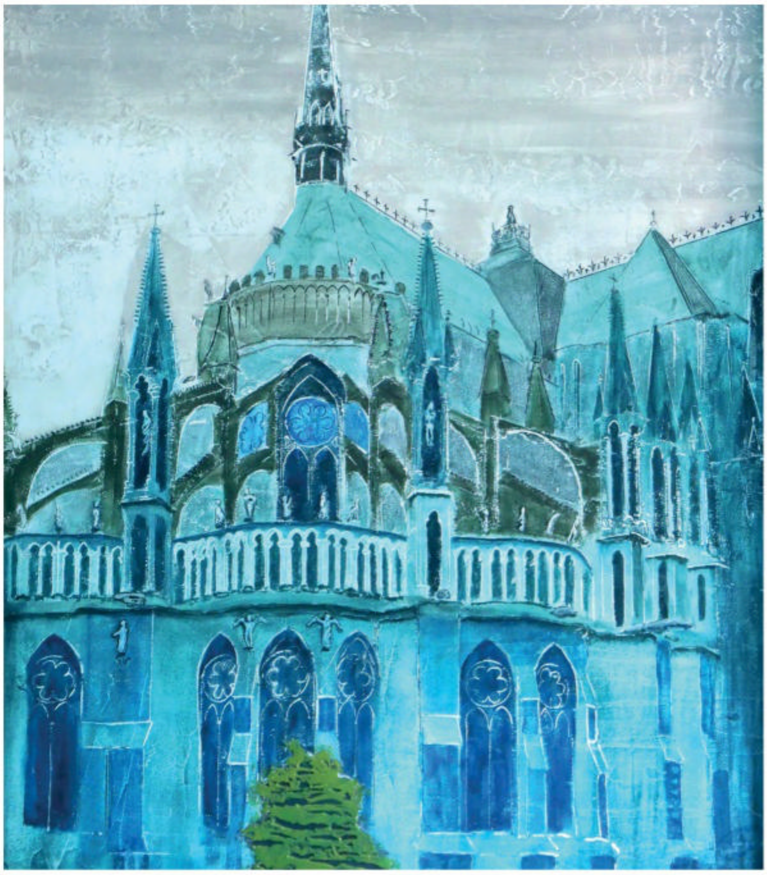

LISA GLEDHILL

ABOVE LEFT: Ithell Colquhoun, *Landscape with Antiquities (Lamorna)*, 1950. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Ithell Colquhoun, *Notre Dame*, 1976. **BELOW:** Ithell Colquhoun, *Diagrams of Love: The Bird or the Egg?*, circa 1940.

cards, without the distracting narrative of pictures. It's an extraordinarily complex but coherent work on both a magical and artistic level.

This was followed by a set of paintings representing the 10 spheres, or sephirotic intelligences, on the Kabbalah tree of life, created through the same enamel technique. This series is even more conceptually complex, combining the colour correspondences from all four scales of existence as taught to acolytes of the Golden Dawn and published in Crowley's *Liber 777*. Colquhoun's enamels, accompanied by poems listing the qualities and associations of each image, are bound into a book which she entitled *The Decad of Intelligence*. We don't know if she ever hoped to publish this as a teaching aid or as a meditation tool for serious magicians, but the intensity of colour and reflective quality of the enamels would have been difficult to reproduce in the late 1970s. Considering her belief that the colours were not just symbolic, but were an actual manifestation of the intelligences that make up existence, this short manuscript could be one of the most powerful magical texts ever created.

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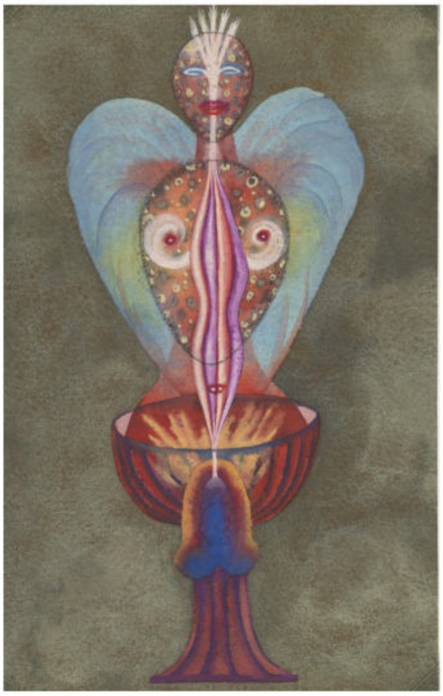


Like the titular heroine of *The Sea Priestess*, by fellow occultist Dion Fortune (**FT185:50, 267:34-41, 287:44-48**), Colquhoun left her house to the National Trust when she finally departed this material world. She also left the Trust all her own artworks still in her possession; with her written work, letters and notebooks going to The Tate Gallery. Other charities, including the Noise Abatement Society, also received bequests. At her own request, she was cremated without religious ceremony and her ashes scattered to the wind in her beloved Cornwall. For a long time her artistic legacy seemed as lost as those specks of ash, but in the last few years, there's been a change in the wind. Much of her written work has been republished, scholarly books and articles have been written about her, and her archive of unpublished material is finally getting the attention it deserves from students of art and the occult. But the most direct way to understand Colquhoun's views and insights is through her visual art. Her first language was colour, and the stories she told with it are there to be read by all who understand the grammar.

NOTES

1 From "The Zodiac and the Flashing Colours", essay by Ithell Colquhoun in *Hermetic Journal* No 4, pp.8-9, 1979. Available online at https://www.amazon.co.uk/Hermetic-Journal-1979-Adam-McLean-ebook/dp/B07JJYLPMY

2 Ithell Colquhoun, *Sword of Wisdom*, GP Putnam and Sons, 1975.

3 Nearly everyone struggles with this name. It's pronounced "Eye-thel" and was a surname of Welsh origin from her mother's side of the family. By dropping the typically English 'Margaret', she was emphasising her mystical Celtic roots.

4 *Sword of Wisdom*, p.19.

5 See *The Original Account of the Teachings, Rites and Ceremonies of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn* by Israel Regardie. In particular, Vol II Book 3, the third point of the Adeptus Minor ritual.

6 Ibid., Vol III Book 4, The Complete Symbol of the Rose Cross "Faulty colours or shapes in Divine symbols are a degradation of Divine things and are practical blasphemy."

7 See *PolyChromie Architecturale* by Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, aka Le Corbusier

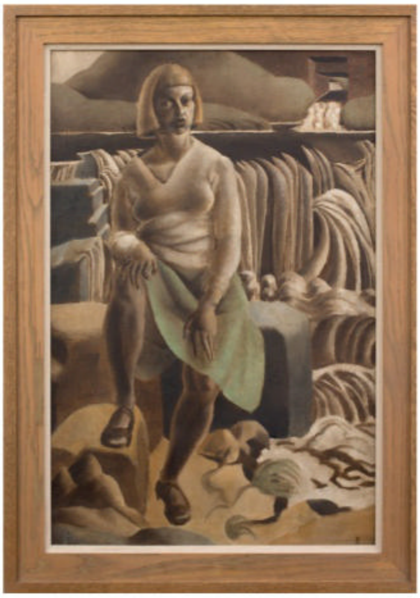
8 See her essay "Children of the Mantic Stain" In *Athene* 5 No. 2 (1951), pp.29-34.

9 This is Colquhoun's preferred spelling.

LISA GLEDHILL is a writer and film maker who's been fascinated by Ithell Colquhoun's rainbow path for the last 15 years.

ITHELL COLQUHOUN AT TATE BRITAIN

LISA GLEDHILL VISITS A MAJOR NEW EXHIBITION DEVOTED TO THE ARTIST'S WORK



TATE / LARINA FERNANDES

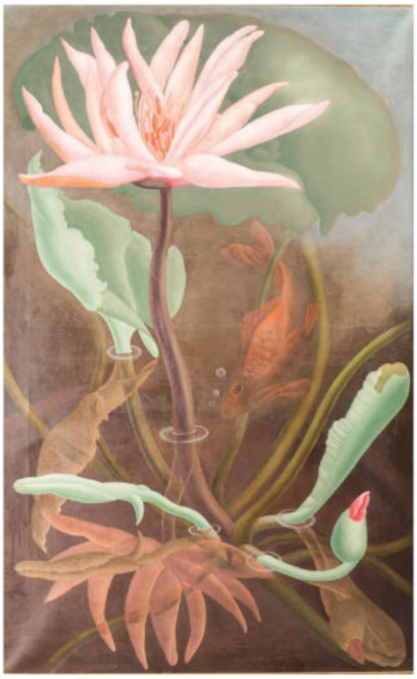
ARTS UNIVERSITY PLYMOUTH © SPIRE HEALTHCARE, © NOISE ABATEMENT SOCIETY, © SAMARITANS

THE RUTH BORCHARD COLLECTION, COURTESY OF PIANO NOBILE, LONDON © SPIRE HEALTHCARE, © NOISE ABATEMENT SOCIETY, © SAMARITANS

You enter the Tate Britain exhibition through a windowless red corridor. It's a claustrophobically vaginal approach, echoing themes of the art on display beyond the big red door. This is the world of Ithell Colquhoun, full of double images and double meanings, where a cave can be a womb, an angel can be a gorgon, and a cucumber in a jam jar can be something else entirely. For an artist who was always elusive, rare and obscure – it's a surprise to see the sheer number of her works in one place – Colquhoun is finally getting more attention than she could have ever dreamed of. Or maybe not, because she was never one to undervalue herself. That's clear from the assertive self-portrait, painted aged 23, that stares you down as you enter the first room.

This is the first major London exhibition of her work, and is a slightly slimmed-down version of the exhibition which ran earlier this year at Tate St Ives. Almost all of her best-known paintings are here, alongside quite a few rarities. Strangely, though, *The Decad of Intelligence*, a series of 10 images based on the Kabbalah, is absent. It's a disappointment, as this is often regarded as the pinnacle of her achievement in fusing occult expression with artistic skill. There's also no sign of her less well-known three-dimensional work, which could be down to lack of space, or to the fragility of the sculptures, or just possibly a squeamishness about showing aggregations of old packaging and found objects alongside her more comfortably understood paintings. All the same, it's an impressive collection with works gathered from regional galleries, private collectors, and hidden museum-stores. You're unlikely to see anything like this again any time soon, if ever.

COLQUHOUN'S WATER-LILY IS "THE KIND OF FLOWER YOU WOULDN'T WANT TO BE LEFT ALONE IN A ROOM WITH"



TOP LEFT: Early works at Tate Britain. **TOP RIGHT:** Ithell Colquhoun, *Self-Portrait*, 1929. **ABOVE:** Ithell Colquhoun, *Water-Flower*, 1938.

The first room, conventionally enough, holds her early work, including art-school creations with mythological themes and a series of portraits resembling those of that other occult pioneer Austin Osman Spare (**FT144:34-40**). An adjoining wall has a couple of life-size screen-grabs from a 1948 BBC arts programme showing Colquhoun demonstrating a favourite technique for making pictures by squashing paint-blobs between two sheets of paper. With her permed hair and heavy makeup she looks like an early *Blue Peter* presenter crossed with a Surrealist Fanny Craddock.

The second room deals with her discovery of Surrealism, although Colquhoun herself made a distinction between her truly Surrealist work, with its Salvador Dali influences, and what she called her "Magic-realism" where the picture seems superficially normal but the atmosphere is uncanny. Tate Curator Emma Chambers describes one of these, a large and lusciously overblown study of a water-lily as: "The kind of flower you wouldn't want to be left alone in a room with."

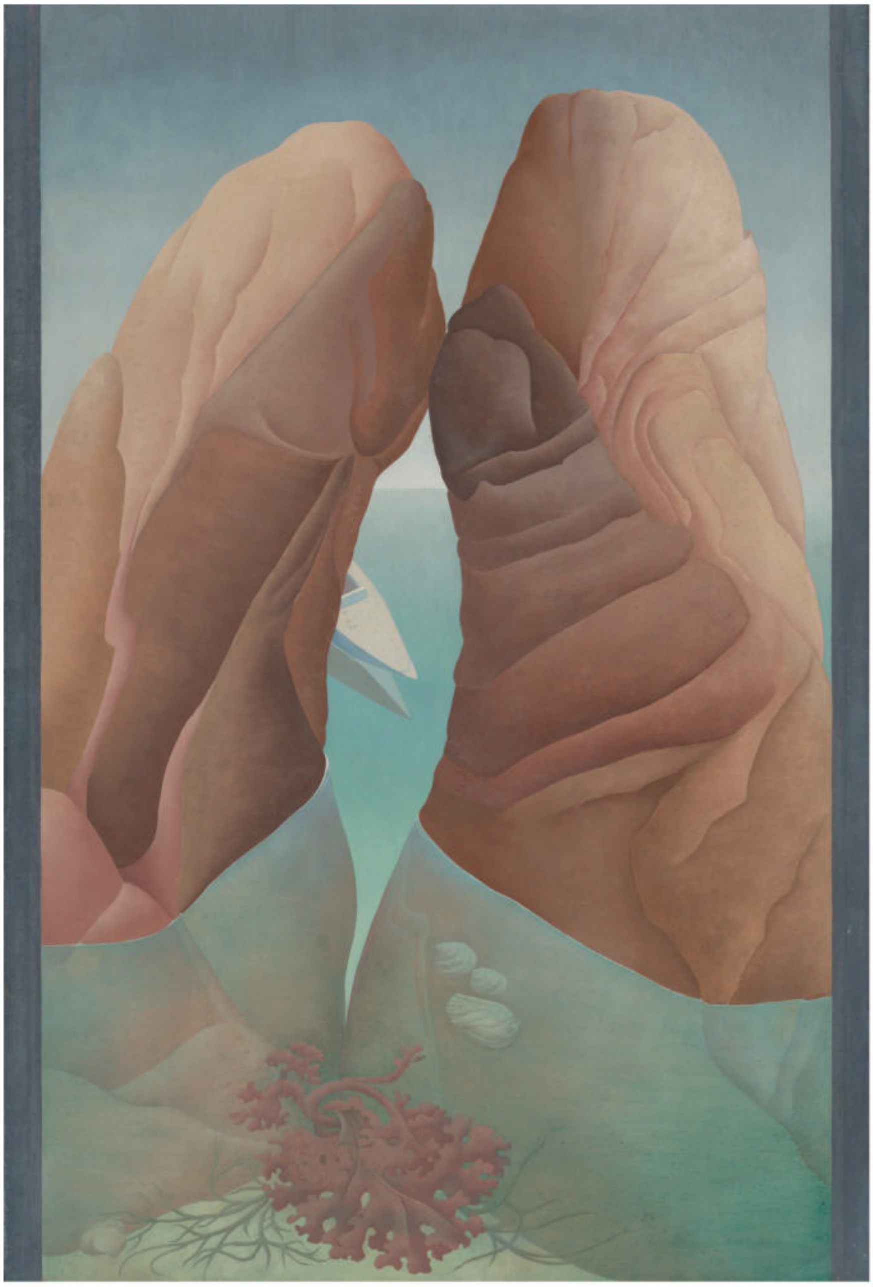
The exhibition deals very successfully with her use of automatic techniques for generating images, which she interpreted and developed into pictures in a process a bit like scrying. Samples and test-pieces of decalcomania (the paint-blob squidges mentioned earlier) entopic graphomania (a sort of free-flowing scribble, guided by irregularities in the paper) and fumage (smoke-stained paper) are displayed alongside the finished works. The decalcomania paintings are particularly effective when hung alongside the mirror-image paper showing the original paint-blobs.

From here on in, the exhibition moves into more overtly magical territory. It's refreshing to see galleries engaging with this important current in her life and work, rather than ignoring it or trying to pass it off as Surrealism. Her paintings featuring standing stones, landmarks and energy currents anticipate the popular interest in "ley lines" and Earth energies by a good 30 years. In contrast, the many small-scale alchemical and sexual watercolours speak of more private magical workings. One image showing a blue man and pink woman, naked, translucent and entwined in an unlikely sexual hexagon is obviously intended as some kind of sigil or spell. The artist has written on it: "Receive this, the stone which is not a stone, This precious thing which has no value, This unknown, which is known of all."

The climax of the show is *Taro*, a sequence of 78 abstract images representing each of the cards in a Tarot deck. Instead of pictures, Colquhoun uses flowing blobs of colour, based on tables of correspondence drawn from the teachings of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn to create a deck for meditation rather than divination. These have been newly-framed and are displayed for the first time in their correct sequence, allowing viewers to trace the colour continuities and relationships across the suits. It's an occult and an artistic triumph. The rich enamel paint of these small but powerful images vibrates with an intensity that really has to be seen to be appreciated.

The exhibition shares its ticket-price, although not its gallery space, with a show of work by Edward Burra. The two artists aren't an obvious pairing, although they were born around the same time and share interests in Surrealism and Queer representation. Burra even seems to have dabbled in the esoteric, judging by the samples from his personal library which included books on witchcraft, popular fiction by Lovecraft and Hubbard, and the magazine *Man, Myth and Magic*. It is not without interest to forteans. The exit naturally takes you past the gift shop, where you can pick up the very thoroughly researched exhibition catalogue, or a Tree of Veins sex-magic tea towel.

THE ITHELL COLQUHOUN EXHIBITION is at Tate Britain, London, until 19 October. Further details and tickets at: https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/burra-and-colquhoun



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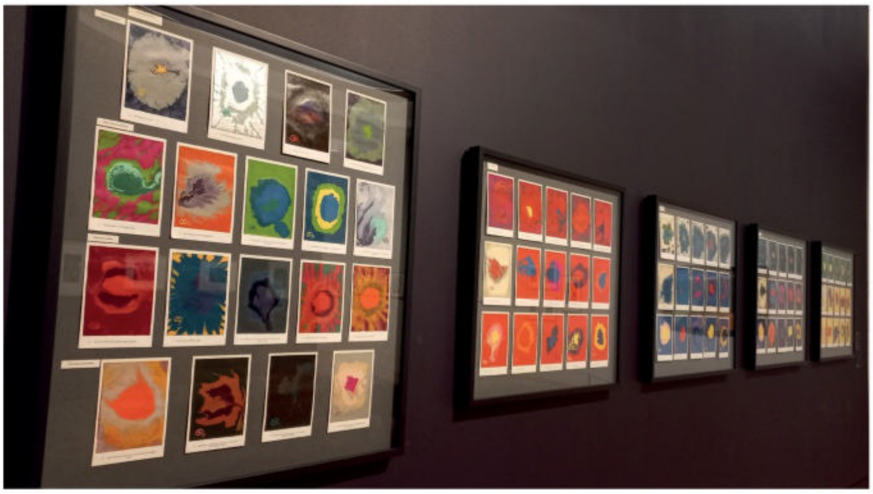


LISA GLEDHILL

TOP: Double images: Ithell Colquhoun, *Scylla (méditerranée)*, 1938. **ABOVE:** Colquhoun's *Taro*, a sequence of 78 abstract images representing the cards of a Tarot deck.

THROWING STONES

Revisiting The Liverpool Leprechaun Hunt

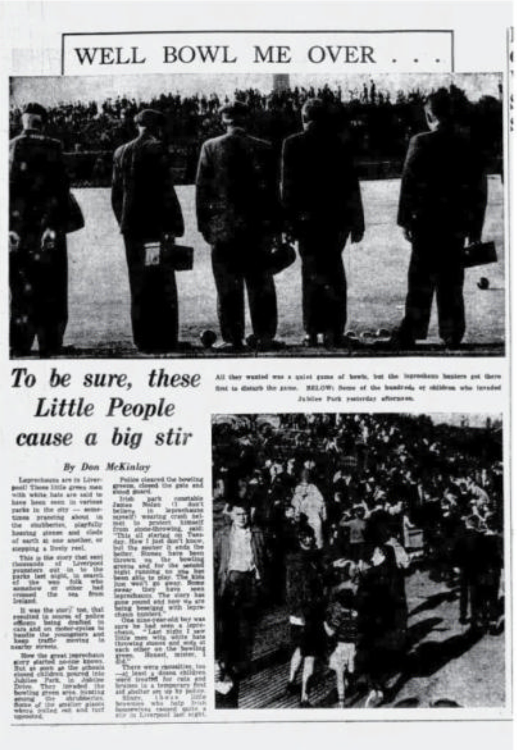
In July 1964, two Liverpool neighbourhoods were, according to news reports of the time, invaded by leprechauns, with gangs of local children quickly mounting a full-scale hunt for the little people. DR MIKE BENBOUGH-JACKSON returns to the scene and asks what in 1960s Britain might have sparked this extremely odd episode...

For many, the 1960s were an exciting time to be alive. Yet the changes that defined this decade could also be unsettling. Everyone knows about the Cold War, UFOs, the music, the fashion… and the leprechauns.

On Wednesday 1 July 1964, reportedly "thousands" of children went looking for leprechauns that had been spotted the night before on a bowling green in Kensington's Jubilee Park. Talk of leprechauns resulted in another substantial hunt taking place in Kirkby about seven miles to the north-east of Kensington. This search lasted two days and peaked on Saturday 11 July.

Liverpool's leprechauns are a well-established part of fortean lore (see **FT299:26-32**). Readers of this article should also consult the studies by Nigel Watson and SD Tucker.[1] Here, some reference will be made in passing to these earlier works, but the focus will be on additional empirical evidence to help explain what was supposedly seen, why the children acted in the way they did and how the historical and geographical context helps us understand how the events were interpreted at the time.

To start, it is important to point out how little we know about the leprechauns. Unlike the Wollaton bubble-car gnomes of 1979 (see **FT31:42, 200:34, 321:43-45, 348:22**), there is only a brief description of Liverpool's small folk. No witnesses were interviewed, asked to write an account, or draw what they saw. Our only information comes from an unnamed nine-year-old boy. Far more material exists about the *search* for the leprechauns than what they looked like or how they behaved.



WELL BOWL ME OVER . . .

To be sure, these Little People cause a big stir

By Don McKinlay

All they wanted was a quiet game of bowls, but the leprechaun hunters got there first to disturb the game. BELOW: Some of the hundreds of children who invaded Jubilee Park yesterday afternoon.

LEFT: The leprechaun panic as covered by the *Liverpool Daily Post*, 2 July 1964. **FACING PAGE:** Children playing on the streets of Kirkby, Liverpool, in 1965.

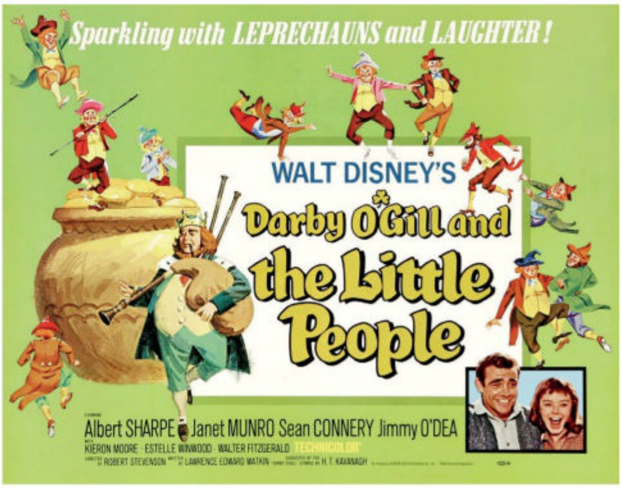
> He saw "little men with white hats" throwing clumps of earth and stones at each other

What is more, there are inconsistencies in the press reporting. The morning paper, the *Liverpool Daily Post*, mentions the age and sex of the witness, but the evening *Liverpool Echo* only refers to "someone". More importantly, the *Post* quotes the lad as saying that he saw "little men with white hats" throwing clumps of earth and stones at each other, whereas a briefer report in the *Echo* quotes the witness as having seen "little green men".

Given its proximity to the event and a more detailed account by a named reporter, Don McKinlay, I suspect the *Post* provides the more accurate quotation. This does not mean we can dismiss the "green men" out of hand, especially as McKinlay also uses the term in a general sense at the start of the report. But in the light of this discrepancy, we need to proceed with caution.

In neither version of the account does the sole witness refer to a leprechaun. Maybe this name was added by the press and became a convenient label for the creatures among those who recalled the event and for the children that participat-

TRINITY MIRROR / MIRRORPIX / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO


Sparkling with LEPRECHAUNS and LAUGHTER!
WALT DISNEY'S
Darby O'Gill and the Little People
Albert SHARPE Janet MUNRO Sean CONNERY Jimmy O'DEA
KIERON MOORE · ESTELLE WINWOOD · WALTER FITZGERALD
TECHNICOLOR
ROBERT STEVENSON
LAWRENCE EDWARD WATKIN

ABOVE LEFT: The 1959 Disney film *Darby O'Gill and the Little People* helped establish a modern image of the leprechaun. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The *Bonanza* episode "Hoss and the Leprechauns aired in the UK on 7 February 1964. **BELOW:** "Thousands of children" joined the leprechaun hunt according to the *Liverpool Echo* of 2 July.

ed in the second hunt in Kirkby. Then again, this does not in itself mean that children did not use the word in Kensington either.

Whichever was the case, a description of small beings, green or otherwise, throwing readily available projectiles at one another is all there is. Even less is known about the beings at the later Kirkby sightings. Yet this, along with their behaviour, does give us something to work with. Firstly, the colour has an association with leprechauns, often depicted as having green or green-brown skin and wearing green clothing that serves as camouflage. But the white hats do not readily fit the leprechaun profile.

Fairies are not known to favour white clothing. For one thing, it would hardly help conceal a timid leprechaun. One 19th-century source, however, observed that Irish fairies sometimes had "broad white hats like mushrooms".[2] This sartorial detail lends support to the idea, put forward by Watson, that the Irish heritage of many Liverpudlians contributed to the leprechaun hunt.

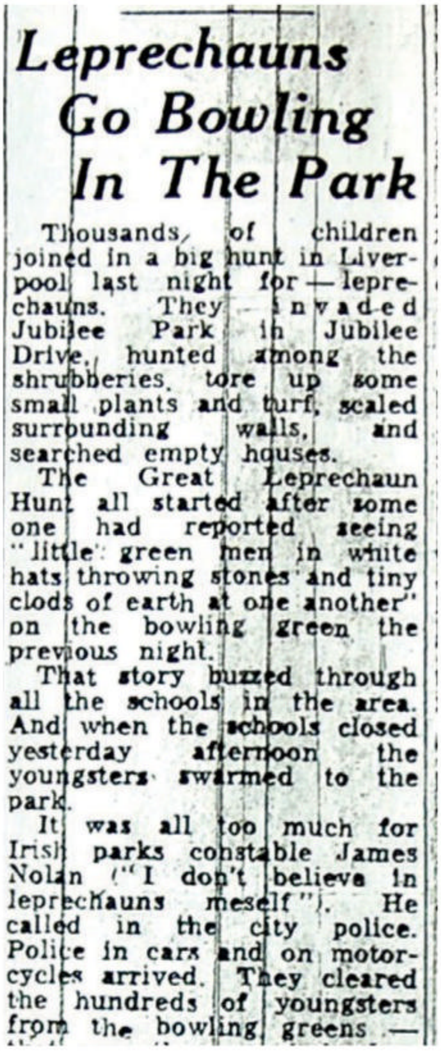
I must admit when I first heard about the white hats I thought of the Smurfs, diminutive Belgian cartoon characters that first appeared in 1961. Although the date and headwear check out, the Smurfs only made their debut on British TV in the 1980s and are blue. There are, however, other beings that tend to wear white hats: bowlers.

A misidentified bowler does little to explain the lithobolia though. On balance, a leprechaun is more likely to misbehave than a bowler, irrespective of whether they prefer to play the crown or lawn version of the game. Moreover, the idea of a supernatural force that hurls projectiles at specific buildings or people has a long history. The only witness description of creatures tossing lumps of earth and stones, an activity known as clodding in the Scottish Highlands, does bear similarities with that troublesome spirit the poltergeist.

Without a doubt, children can throw stones as well as any 'stone throwing ghost'. According to SD Tucker they threw a number. He explains that on not finding any leprechauns, disappointed children "got their kicks" by tossing stones all over the park. While that is an understandable assumption to make, it is not clear from reports in the *Liverpool Daily Post* or *Liverpool Echo* who it was that was doing the throwing.

Does this mean there was a stone throwing poltergeist on the bowling green? My rational mind says, "Of course not". Still, the lack of clarity in the press about the identity of the stone-throwers strikes me as being a little strange, especially as police erected a "temporary first aid shelter" where about 12 children received treatment for minor injuries.

At this time, leprechauns were a fairly common sight in the media



Leprechauns Go Bowling In The Park

Thousands of children joined in a big hunt in Liverpool last night for — leprechauns. They invaded Jubilee Park in Jubilee Drive, hunted among the shrubberies, tore up some small plants and turf, scaled surrounding walls, and searched empty houses.

The Great Leprechaun Hunt all started after some one had reported seeing "little green men in white hats throwing stones and tiny clods of earth at one another" on the bowling green the previous night.

That story buzzed through all the schools in the area. And when the schools closed yesterday afternoon the youngsters swarmed to the park.

It was all too much for Irish parks constable James Nolan ("I don't believe in leprechauns meself"). He called in the city police. Police in cars and on motorcycles arrived. They cleared the hundreds of youngsters from the bowling greens —

SCREEN MEMORIES

There is plenty of evidence, however, of children searching for little people. Why this delusion took the form it did and spread in this way is open to interpretation. At this time, leprechauns were a fairly common sight in the media. For instance, the role of the Disney movie *Darby O'Gill and the Little People* (1959) in establishing a modern image of the leprechaun is well known (see **FT373:76**). Perhaps this presence of leprechauns in popular culture means that Irish ethnicity was not as important as some have thought.

One previously overlooked aspect is the potential role of television. Since many UFO researchers focus on the small screen, it may be of use here too. By 1964 there were 15 million TV licenses in the United Kingdom. As a result of the rapid rise of TV ownership, the Television Act of March 1964 introduced the 9pm watershed to prevent children seeing inappropriate content.

An especially popular show at the time was the Western series *Bonanza*.[3] The episode entitled "Hoss and the Leprechauns", first screened in the USA three days before Christmas in 1963, aired in Liverpool at 8pm on Friday 7 February 1964. It featured the residents of Virginia City searching for the little folk and their gold, just as the children in Liverpool were to do four months later. Although this episode was early in the eve-

ABOVE LEFT: A view from Jubilee Drive showing Kensington's Christ Church and Library and part of the park in the 1960s. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Typical Kensington terraces on Adelaide Street. **BELOW:** A 1935 map of the Kensington area, showing Kensington (later Jubilee) Gardens, the 'Rezzy' and surrounding streets.

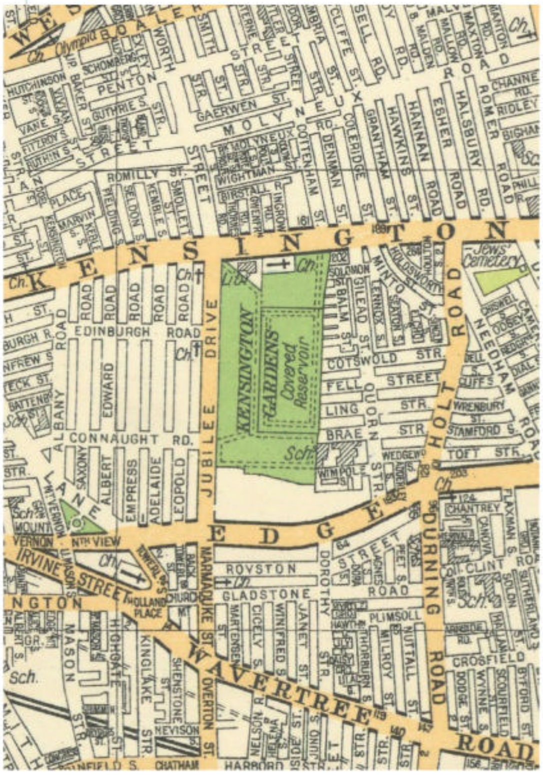
ning and not on a school night, the four-month gap between the programme and the excitement of the summer makes any causal connection appear unlikely though not out of the question.

"The Leprechaun" (1955), a half-hour drama that was part of the *Douglas Fairbanks Jnr Presents* series, appeared on Liverpool televisions on 25 June 1964, five days before the first sighting. This was a Thursday and the programme aired at just past 11pm, an extremely late time for children and well past the recently established watershed. In this respect, it loses credibility as a reason for the children to go on a leprechaun hunt a few days later.

Even so, it is possible that knowledge of this show filtered down to the children from older siblings, parents or even grandparents over the weekend. Word of mouth could have made the tale even more alluring and distorted. Like the *Bonanza* episode, "The Leprechaun" includes a hunt, on this occasion conducted by the denizens of an Irish village who have been convinced by an American folklorist that such creatures really exist. This is, however, a darker tale and ends with the academic revealing a cloven hoof.

The role of TV in the leprechaun affair becomes even clearer when we introduce UFOs. Both Watson and Tucker have noted how the press and children in Kirkby conflated two types of little green men. They also suggest that a story in the Newcastle press in early June about flying saucers and little men could have influenced youngsters in Liverpool. But perhaps it was the box in the living room rather than the newspapers that initially brought the green men into the minds of Liverpool's children.

At 9.40pm on the same night as "The Leprechaun" was aired, an *Outer Limits* episode entitled "The Bellero Shield" dealt with a scientist capturing a "space traveller". The same programme is more well known as being a plausible reason a hypnotised Barney Hill recollected a proto-grey type alien (see **FT322:46-48, 384:44-47, 400:53, 416:28, 428:60-61**). A TV schedule like this cannot be easily dismissed as being a reason for the leprechaun flap. It certainly merits a place alongside Tucker's convincing argument for Ken Dodd's Diddy Men having played a role in the events.



THE LAY OF THE LAND

For an event as peculiar as the Liverpool leprechaun hunt to take place, several factors need to come together. Monocausal explanations, like that put forward by Brian Jones, who in 1982 claimed to have sparked the affair after being mistaken for a leprechaun, are often unsatisfactory. So, in addition to the cultural influences outlined earlier, it is important not to overlook the geography of the two areas where the leprechaun hunts occurred. The lay of the land played a significant role shaping the proceedings.

Three schools, two primaries and one secondary, abutted the park in Kensington. The Edge Hill secondary modern and primary schools were located right next to the bowling green, and a Catholic primary school was just to the south. Press reports do not mention where the children who occupied the park until 10pm came from, and there could have also been pupils from other nearby schools. But the presence of three schools in the immediate vicinity must have provided a fertile breeding ground for any rumours about the fey on the bowling green.

A covered reservoir, known as the 'Rezzy' by local youngsters, occupied a large part of the park. For their own safety, adults discouraged children from going up there and even at ordinary times the park police worked hard to prevent the area becoming a makeshift football pitch or cricket ground.[4] During the leprechaun hunt, children clambered on the embankment to get a better view of the whole of the area and any concealed fairy folk.

A local police station near the Catholic primary school would have ensured there was a swift response to the stream of children, estimated to range in age from 'tiny tots' to 14-year-olds, coming from the nearby streets. Nonetheless, local officers called for additional support. With two major roads on either side of the park, the safe passage of traffic and pedestrians was a priority. Just this brief overview of the location gives us an idea of why the leprechaun hunt attracted so much attention.

By contrast, the second hunt covered a wider area. This may explain why Chris Jones, who took part in the Kirkby hunt, did not "recall seeing anyone in authority". This was even though the children ensured that "every last scrap of vegetation had been torn up" during their search.[5] However, police went to St Chad's, a church near the town

TRINITY MIRROR / MIRRORPIX / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

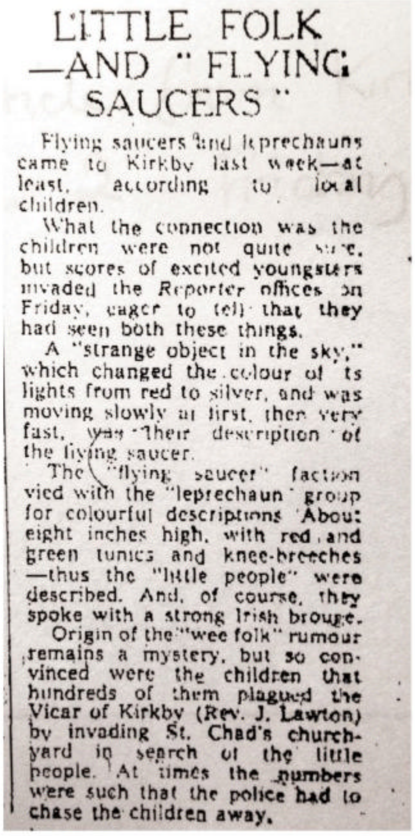
ABOVE: St Chad's Church was at the centre of the Kirkby leprechaun hunt. **BELOW:** A local news report about the Kirkby episode adds "flying saucers" to the leprechaun hunt and notes that "hundreds" of children plagued Reverend Lawton of St Chad's and had to be dispersed by the police.

centre, and according to *The People*, a rare example of a national daily that reported the event, "children reported missing from home" during the period 10 to 11 July were found in the churchyard.

In Kirkby, the press observed that youngsters focused their attention on two churches and a school. St Chad's appears to have been the centre of activity, but children also searched the grounds of St Marie's Roman Catholic School and the nearby St Mary Mother of God Church both about a mile from St Chad's. Those who recall the hunt, though, also mention the wooded area known as 'Old Rough'. As was the case in Kensington, a few schools are located nearby.

There is more information about the Church of England institution of St Chad's in the press, including quotes from the Rev John Lawton, who expressed relief when the hunt abated. Lawton's concern extended beyond the state of the churchyard as there was a busy roundabout near the church. Moreover, some children preferred to walk in the middle of the road than risk being ambushed by any leprechauns that lurked in hedgerows.[6] Recollections like this are a reminder that some children, in Kirkby at least, felt they were the hunted and not the hunter.

St Chad's church in Kirkby appears to have been the centre of activity



LITTLE FOLK
—AND "FLYING
SAUCERS"

Flying saucers and leprechauns came to Kirkby last week—at least, according to local children.

What the connection was the children were not quite sure, but scores of excited youngsters invaded the *Reporter* offices on Friday, eager to tell that they had seen both these things.

A "strange object in the sky," which changed the colour of its lights from red to silver, and was moving slowly at first, then very fast, was their description of the flying saucer.

The "flying saucer" faction vied with the "leprechaun" group for colourful descriptions 'About eight inches high, with red and green tunics and knee-breeches—thus the "little people" were described. And, of course, they spoke with a strong Irish brogue.

Origin of the "wee folk" rumour remains a mystery, but so convinced were the children that hundreds of them plagued the Vicar of Kirkby (Rev. J. Lawton) by invading St. Chad's churchyard in search of the little people. At times the numbers were such that the police had to chase the children away.

THE GENERATION GAME

But it would be short-sighted to see adult interest in the leprechaun mania as being only about child safety. Indeed, the views of the 'big people' are an important part of this episode of fortean history. While safety was undoubtedly one practical concern, contemporaries could see the events of the first half of July 1964 in other ways too.

The first, which could be called the pessimistic interpretation, is that the occupation of adult spaces, such as the bowling green and churchyards, by young children was part of a wider social problem. Demographics played a part as the number of births and therefore the number of young children had been increasing since 1955 and would peak at just over a million in 1964. There were just more youngsters about.

Added to this was concern about the behaviour of teenagers that had been brewing since the end of the World War II and culminated in the quintessential moral panic about Mods and Rockers coming to blows in southern resorts in the spring and summer of 1964. Of these, the May clashes in Brighton were the most widely reported. Stone-throwing was a feature of the disturbances, so it is imaginable that the stones in Kensington Park carried echoes of this national event.

Of course, the Liverpool leprechaun hunters were younger than the Mods and Rockers, whose average age has been calculated as being 18, whereas few leprechaun hunters were 14 and many seem to have aged between nine and 10.[7] All the same, these would become teenagers soon enough, and those who were a little older than them had hardly set a good example.

A survey of the local press around the time of the leprechaun flap contains a mixture of reports of stones being thrown at trains, school property being set alight and headlines like "Scout activities could

TRINITY MIRROR / MIRRORPIX / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

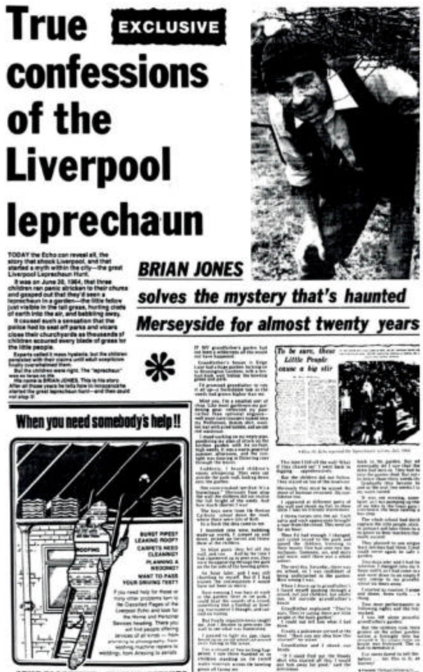
ABOVE: Teenagers to be: Kirkby children play on the wreck of an abandoned car in March 1965. **BELOW:** The *Liverpool Echo* of 26 Jan 1982 ran a story in which Brian Jones claimed that the 1964 leprechaun panic had started when he was mistaken for one of the little people by local children.

be the answer to Kirkby vandalism" and "Sports days could solve teen problems".[8] There was also plenty of commentary about delinquency in general that was attributed to increased wealth, lack of religion and poor discipline. It is important to consider this context to appreciate the impact on adults of the children who occupied Kensington Park or failed to return home in Kirkby and were discovered by police in the grounds of St Chads.

However, there is also a way in which this context led to a more positive reading of the leprechaun hunt. Complaints that children were maturing too early in the hothouse of 1960s commercial popular culture were common. For many adults, the interests of the next generation would have appeared at best novel or at worst a sign of social decay. In the haze of nostalgia, it is easy for us to forget how much concern was caused by the so-called birth of the teenager.

Although there may have been disreputable and problematic elements to the 'Great Leprechaun Hunt', when set against less savoury stories in the contemporary press the leprechaun hunters were just children doing the silly, imaginative things that children do. Therefore, this event may well have soothed adult anxieties about the younger generation: a hunt for the little people would have reassured anyone concerned about children losing their capacity for magical make-believe.[9]

The odd events of June and July 1964 will doubtless continue to attract attention and in time more theories and evidence will emerge. Many other questions remain. However, I hope this reinvestigation of the leprechaun frenzy provides a few helpful new sidelights on the whole affair. Paying careful attention to the behaviour and appearance of the characters on the bowling green, potential cultural influences on the children, the geography and adult perspectives may not result in a pot of gold, but it does take us closer to the end of the rainbow.



True confessions of the Liverpool leprechaun EXCLUSIVE

BRIAN JONES solves the mystery that's haunted Merseyside for almost twenty years

TODAY the Echo can reveal all, the story that shook Liverpool, and that started a myth within the city—the great Liverpool Leprechaun Hunt.

It was on June 30, 1964, that three children ran panic stricken to their chums and gasped out that they'd seen a leprechaun in a garden—the little fellow just visible in the tall grass, hurling clods of earth into the air, and babbling away.

It caused such a sensation that the police had to seal off parks and vicars close their churchyards as thousands of children scoured every blade of grass for the little people.

Experts called it mass hysteria, but the children persisted with their claims until adult scepticism finally overwhelmed them.

But the children were right. The "leprechaun" [illegible]

His name is BRIAN JONES. This is his story. After all those years he tells how in innocence he started the great leprechaun hunt—and then could not stop it.

To be sure, these Little People cause a big stir

When you need somebody's help!!

ECHO CLASSIFIED - AT YOUR SERVICE

NOTES

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3 Crissy Rock, *Bonanza Scouse, Choppers & Space Hoppers: A Liverpool Life of Happy Days and Hard Times* (Kings Road Publishing, 2018), p.266

4 Chris Byrne, Facebook communication, interviewed 23/7/2024.

5 Chris Jones, *Confessions of a Catholic School Boy: Life in St Kevin's School, Kirkby 1966-1973* (Kindle, 2023).

6 Susan Doyle, Facebook communication, 23/7/2024.

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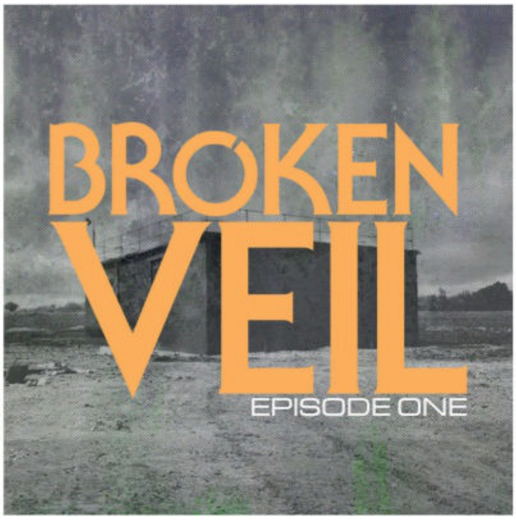
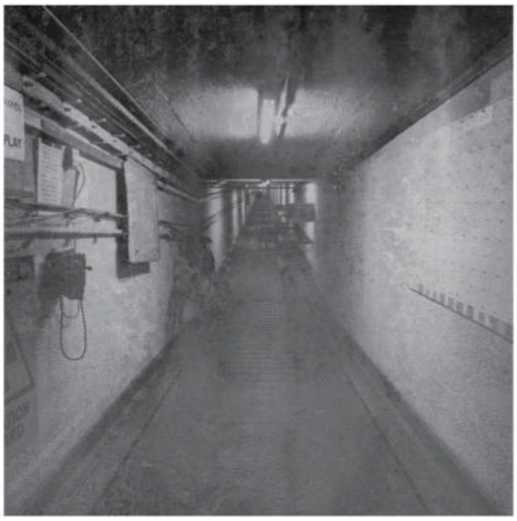
9 *Liverpool Echo*,14 July 1964, p.4.

DR MIKE BENBOUGH-JACKSON is a senior lecturer in Modern British History at Liverpool John Moores University. He is the author of *Cardiganshire: The Concise History* (University of Wales Press, 2007), *Cardiganshire and the Cardi c.1760-c.2000: Locating a place and its people* (University of Wales Press, 2011) and *Merseyside's War* (Amberley Publishing, 2015).

Beyond the veil

Hit new podcast *Broken Veil* explores decidedly fortean themes in the creepiest liminal corners of Essex. Creators **WILL MACLEAN** and **JOEL MORRIS** invite FT's **BOB FISCHER** to Station 14 for a scratching mass...





"Somebody said to me that it's like *Detectorists* meets *The X Files*," smiles Will Maclean. "And as far as I'm concerned, there is no higher praise."

We're discussing *Broken Veil*, a new six-part podcast created and hosted by Will and his long-term friend Joel Morris. The comparisons made are entirely apposite: like gentle BBC comedy *Detectorists*, *Broken Veil* explores the hobby-based bonds of male camaraderie against a backdrop of tangled Essex countryside. But it also boasts a sense of all-pervading weirdness, an atmosphere of creeping unease far more relevant to the investigations of Mulder and Scully.

Both Will and Joel are celebrated writers. Will's supernatural 2020 novel *The Apparition Phase* was widely acclaimed, while Joel continues to be a prolific TV writer, putting words into the mouth of Diane Morgan's fearless BBC investigator Philomena Cunk. *Broken Veil,* however, places their own presenting talents in the spotlight, with the duo on the trail of what appears to be an alarming rift in the fabric of reality located somewhere between Chelmsford and Basildon.

"We wanted it to be saturated with the spirit of place," explains Will. "Joel is from Essex, and it's a county we both love. It's an old, old place."

"I got into researching the history of Essex," says Joel. "I've only discovered in the last few years that the history of where I grew up is fascinating. I'm from Chelmsford, near where the Assizes were held, where Matthew Hopkins tried hundreds of women as witches. I've researched witchcraft in every other part of the country, but I didn't realise it was also happening at the end of my parents' road."

Essex could be the location for an eddy in the space-time continuum

"We've muddled up the geography a bit, though," admits Will. "We kept thinking of Borley, where people still turn up to conduct paranormal investigations. If you live there, it must be an absolute pain in the arse."

The podcast reveals its secrets with a sense of gently swelling disquiet. In Episode One, real-life actor Tony Way sends the duo on the trail of a mysterious Essex facility where, he tells them, he was once despatched for an unnerving medical examination. In Episode Two, comedian Sara Barron claims to have performed a stand-up set for a sinister corporate audience in a similar building, later becoming trapped backstage in a network of featureless corridors.

The inspiration for these plotlines, explain Will and Joel, came from an online creepypasta urban legend. The 'backrooms' meme began with a single image of an empty shop unit posted to the image-sharing website 4chan in 2019, but has since exploded to become an expanded parallel universe of deserted commercial properties with an ambience of alarming wrongness. . .

"My kid has talked endlessly about the backrooms," says Joel. "We once went to the cinema, and we left through the wrong door and found ourselves in the unmarked corridors at the back. And they were so scared. In the end, we had to find an intercom button and push it. I'm sure everyone has been in similar places, in those hidden bits of a shopping centre that don't have the corporate branding. You just think 'Have I slipped through a rift?'"

"I remember once getting lost in the back of a Chinese restaurant," shudders Will. "The architecture was all the same, and I remember worrying I was going to be stuck there forever..."

The hair-raising stories relayed to Will and Joel by friends within the TV industry send them scurrying to investigate, and further contributors seem to compound the case for Essex being the location for an eddy in the space-time continuum. In Episode Three, actor and director Al Campbell (attention, Charlie Brooker fans – you'll know him as Barry Shitpeas) claims to have visited a secret military bunker and spotted *Blackadder* actress Gabrielle Glaister filming a wartime drama that seems not to exist on our plane of reality. Episode Four, meanwhile, has comedy actor Paul Putner relaying a classic tale of spookiness from a 1970s school trip to an historic Essex church. The stories told are relayed with impressive conviction by all concerned.

"All the actors were incredible in different ways," says Will. "Joel and I spent weeks trying to edit around the fact that we can't really act, but the speed with which they all digested our stories and personalised them was amazing. Tony Way said that when he was being stared

LEFT: Joel Morris (left) and Will Maclean, the duo behind *Broken Veil*.

ALEXIS DUBUS

at by two women during that strange medical, it was 'like they were watching a pub telly'.Stuff like that was just priceless."

"We were going to make a film with Al Campbell a few years ago," recalls Joel. "And we all went on a location recce to a military facility. So that story was partially a conversation with a mate about something that actually happened."

"We've tried to do these things in a clever way, though," adds Will. "I've known Gabrielle Glaister for years, but nobody knows that I know her! So we were able to speak to her as though she was a complete stranger. We didn't want to be Jeremy Beadle, winding people up, but we still wanted that verisimilitude."

Like *Ghostwatch* before it, *Broken Veil* is a piece of fiction whose believability derives from the contributions of genuine public figures. But both Will and Joel repeatedly stress that, although the stories featured in *Broken Veil* are often inspired by real-life tall tales, there is no Beadle-esque intent to deceive listeners.

"I thought it was important for it not to be a prank," says Joel. "Essentially, the people who made the story, Will and I, are being led a merry dance. And that's a great Folk Horror story – people being led willingly into a delusion of their own making. It's basically *The Wicker Man*! I wanted *us* to be the fools, not the audience."

As the stories of *Broken Veil* begin to coalesce, Will and Joel attempt to construct an overall narrative that links these disparate anecdotes into a unifying theory. And it's a theory riddled with forteana, including disturbing EVP recordings of what they call "cthonic babble": skin-crawling phrases seemingly distilled from the electronic ether. Was a "scratching mass" really an ancient Essex witchcraft ceremony? Is "Station 14" a stop on a rural railway line that exists only in a parallel world? These are probably not questions that should be answered here.

As is increasingly obvious, though, both Will and Joel are avowed **FT** readers. **FT349**, with its cover feature on the Mandela Effect, makes a cameo appearance in *Broken Veil* Episode Three and – flattery ahoy – Paul Putner is referred to as "a Seventies kid, he's Haunted Generation". And one regular and long-running FT feature has proved a particular influence on the series' overall tone.

"The bit of *Fortean Times* that we're really obsessed with is 'It Happened To Me'," says Joel. "Because at the point that would normally be the most exciting part of a fictional piece, the stories just stop. There's never any explanation, and I like that – it's the authenticity of nonsense. There was a great one where a kid looked through a fence and saw a large, black two-dimensional shape in a field, shaped like a bowler hat. And his mum said 'Never tell anyone about this!'. That's my favourite story, and we wanted exactly that feel.

"And if *Broken Veil* is an essay on anything, it's on pareidolia. Which is what fortean thought often is: trying to make rational sense out of a series of irrational clues. All the way through the series, we keep saying 'Don't trust this – you're seeing patterns where there are no patterns'."

"Yes, it's a story about the nature of perception," nods Will. "What became the *Broken Veil* method was to take all these stories and make a bigger, different story out of them – one that you can take or leave. So there is a proper narrative spine, but when you get to the end it unravels in a way that you probably wouldn't expect. And I think it gets there in a very interesting route. As Charles Fort said, 'One measures a circle beginning anywhere'."

Broken Veil has been an avowed success, topping Apple's fiction podcast charts, and the duo are planning further instalments. In the meantime, Joel Morris is keen to conclude our conversation with an example of genuinely uncanny synchronicity.

"The last part of the show is us, out in the freezing cold at night, telling a story about Robert Anton Wilson," he recalls. "And we fluffed it. So we went out again, but in the daytime – and you could hear that the world was alive. It wrecked it. We said 'We need to re-record this at 10 o'clock, in the dark, in a field in Essex'. So we tried three or four different places, and everywhere we went there was a bikers' meet or somebody fixing their roof! But eventually we drove off randomly, stopped somewhere quiet, the Moon was up, and it sounded brilliant.

"The next day, I tried to work out where we'd been, and we'd actually been recording at Station 14. The real place where we'd based the fictional station. We'd never been there before, it was an unmarked field in the middle of nowhere, but it was exactly where we'd planned that Station 14 would be. And that's true – I genuinely haven't invented that story."

He pauses for breath and smiles with only the vaguest hint of mischief. "Except I might have done."

***Broken Veil* is available now on all major podcast platforms.**

BOB FISCHER is FT's regular 'Haunted Generation' correspondent. You can find him scribbling at hauntedgeneration.co.uk or writing audio plays for mulgrave-audio.co.uk.

STRANGE STATESMEN #65

FULL OF BULL?

Is there room in British government for a man who openly believes in ghosts? **SD TUCKER** explores the strange pre-political paranormal career of Reform UK's latest chairman, Dr David Bull.

ITV's weekday magazine news programme *Good Morning Britain* is no stranger to tales of ghosts and poltergeists. Its regular presenter Richard Madeley is well known for his belief in spirits, and has reported several sightings of phantoms on-air himself. In 2021 alone, he told astonished viewers about two separate recent experiences. Interviewing fellow TV presenters Dick and Dom about their then-forthcoming E4 series *Celebrity Ghost Trip*, Richard revealed how he had not long seen a ghost too. Sitting in his garden reading the paper, Richard looked up into the empty upper floor of his house and saw what he described as "a white face looking down at me, not moving, but just staring at me… It was very pale and unmoving and it made me feel a bit strange."

Discussing a trip to Euro Disney with his wife and former TV co-presenter Judy Finnegan on another episode, Madeley further described how, awaking in the middle of the night, he spotted a human silhouette sitting on the edge of the married couple's shared bed in their Paris hotel room. Presuming it was Judy, Richard extended a hand to tap her on the back and check she was OK. Realising the figure was not his wife, however, Richard released "a kind of guttural noise", whereupon "this thing, this creature, stood up very, very fast and with supernatural speed, shot across the room and disappeared around the corner into the passage that led to the bathroom." Springing up, Richard bravely pursued the shadow-person, but it had disappeared. Checking, Madeley found the bathroom empty and the hotel-room door locked and chained, meaning nobody could possibly have entered or exited, whilst the entire area "had gone very cold". [1]

COCK AND BULL STORY

Given Richard Madeley's known leanings upon this issue, therefore, when the new Chairman of Nigel Farage's Reform UK Party, Dr David Bull, went into the *Good Morning Britain* studio on 11 June, he might have expected a sympathetic hearing regarding his own paranormal experiences. Of these he professed to have had plenty, being a former TV presenter himself, most notably fronting the infamously dubious Living TV ghost-hunting show *Most Haunted Live!* from 2002-2005. Bull got his new political role after the previous Reform UK Chairman, Zia Yusuf, temporarily stood down from the organisation following a row regarding banning the burka. Initially, therefore, Bull was quizzed by Madeley and his co-host Susanna Reid about his views on this issue, plus his recently stated support for the idea of reintroducing the death penalty. Yet, as a former presenter of *Most Haunted*, Bull would presumably think this measure wholly redundant, as death was surely not the end?

With the boring political stuff out of the way, Madeley then asked his guest: "Do you believe in ghosts?" Dr Bull replied that he did, on account of having had "some very odd experiences in the paranormal" when presenting his old show. One of these came at the hands (quite literally) of *Most Haunted*'s resident celebrity spirit medium Derek Acorah, an alleged fraud whom Bull sensationally claimed had become possessed by an evil spirit one day before attempting to murder him by strangulation.

KARL BLACK / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT: Reform UK's new Chairman, Dr David Bull. **FACING PAGE:** Bull (right) in his previous life as a *Most Haunted* presenter alongside Derek Acorah (left) and Yvette Fielding (centre).

> "AND THEN DEREK ACORAH JUMPED ON ME AND TRIED TO STRANGLE ME"

In Bull's own account: "When I was doing *Most Haunted Live*, which was… the world's largest live ghost-hunt… when we came off air, some things happened that I cannot explain… For example, I was driving through a wood and it was pouring with rain, and I knew someone was in my car. So I stopped the car in the middle of the wood, opened the boot, couldn't find anyone, got back into the car, drove really fast to the hotel. Derek Acorah… came up to me in the bar and said, 'You didn't come here on your own, did you?' And I said, 'What do you mean?' And he said, 'Your grandmother [i.e., her ghost] is with you.' So I was like, OK, and then he changed facially, he started to channel her, that's what he said, and then he jumped on me and tried to strangle me. I'm not kidding. I had bouncers in those days, and they pulled him off me, and then I went to bed. The next day I said, 'Would you like to explain why you tried to kill me overnight?' And he said, 'Well, when I was talking to your grandmother, I was then hijacked by another evil spirit.'"

At this point, Richard Madeley himself became temporarily possessed by the spirit of Alan Partridge and, referring to Bull's support for capital punishment, observed of Acorah's attempted murder that "Well, if he'd been successful, he would have been hanged by now, wouldn't he under your regime?" [2]

GULLY BULL

Even a man like Richard Madeley, who believes in ghosts and openly speaks of having seen several himself, cannot help but take the piss when confronted with a politician who also admits to encountering such uncanny entities. Thus, when the general British public – many of whom will, of course, be far more sceptical about such matters – or at least willing to claim they are for partisan political purposes – heard about Dr Bull's confession, they could hardly be expected to restrain themselves from mocking the poor man about his unlikely story either. The surname 'Bull' is already an unfortunate one for a politician, leading to the inevitable mocking tabloid headlines and online puns (of the same kind I have used myself throughout this article) springing up everywhere you looked. The general

implication was, "You can't trust a man who believes in rubbish like ghosts to run the country"; and, by extension, "You can't trust Reform UK to do so either – they're a party full of total loonies."

But is this line of logic really fair? As long as a man's private beliefs in subjects like ghosts or possession don't influence his actions in office once elected, I'm unsure how relevant they actually are. If Winston Churchill had happened to believe in the Loch Ness Monster, would that have made him unfit to be PM? Voters rarely object to faithful Christians or Muslims serving as MPs, and yet their religious beliefs on matters of conscience such as assisted dying or gay marriage will often directly affect their conduct in Parliament; it seems unlikely that Dr Bull's own belief in an afterlife will influence him similarly, unless it turns out his stated support for hanging actually rests upon the belief that killing a criminal wouldn't *really* kill him permanently at all, which does seem rather unlikely. In any case, many voters (like myself) happen to believe in ghosts too, if not necessarily in the ability of Derek Acorah to summon them, so hearing Bull's silly story won't necessarily put them off voting Reform UK anyway.

If critics really wanted to discredit the real-life Dr Gully Bull, there are surely other methods which could be used. For example, you could point out that, when young, he was a good friend of Nigel Farage – which does make it sound rather a coincidence that, in later life, he just 'happened' to have been chosen by Nigel as the right man for the Party Chairman job from the many hundreds of potential applicants across the country.

Some other aspects of Bull's pre-Reform UK career have aspects as comical as his stint fronting *Most Haunted*. Beginning adult life as an NHS hospital doctor, Bull soon turned towards a less stressful media career, initially by putting out popular medical books with cringeworthy titles like *Cool and Celibate? Sex and No Sex*, arguing for the value of abstinence amongst teenagers, and *What Every Girl Should Know: An A-Z of [Female] Health From Allergies to Zits!*, before appearing in the obscure romantic comedy film *Cavemen* and becoming a TV host. Coming out as gay and joining the Conservative Party, in 2007 he marched at the Brighton Pride Parade wearing a T-shirt saying "I've come out… I'm a Tory"; which recalls the classic spoof *Private Eye* headline, "Yes, I'm Lib Dem, Admits Gay MP". [3]

BULL-BAITING

A more serious ground for attempting to discredit Dr Bull as regards his long-term involvement with the paranormal world would be accusations that he has allegedly lied about certain aspects of it. Bull was interviewed in 2004 by the BadPsychics website ("Your trusted resource for uncovering the truth behind fake psychics and debunking supernatural claims"), whose avowedly sceptical outlook, you might think, would have made the good doctor very wary about what he told them; but evidently not.

Although calling Bull "a really nice chap", the BadPsychic interviewer was able to confront him with prior comments he had made in his capacity as a qualified medic on a pre-*Most Haunted* TV appearance to the effect that: "People who hear spirit voices are psychotic." With that in mind, wouldn't this seem to imply he secretly must have thought Derek Acorah himself was a lunatic, and that he was just pretending to believe what Derek said as part of his new job presenting a sensationalist popular ghost-hunting show? "I think you've probably taken my comments out of context," Bull replied; spoken like a true politician.

Worse, Bull was caught out incorrectly claiming to have seen a clip of the *Most Haunted* on-site investigation crew abusing "a £25,000 thermal imaging cam" to measure how hot one another's farts were "for about one hour", embarrassing footage which Bull said that "of course" he had seen, as it had supposedly gone out on-air. In fact, said film had never been broadcast at all, just leaked onto the Internet by an inside mole who evidently thought the whole show was made-up bollocks and everyone involved just pretending to believe in spooks. Bull's unconvincing response was as follows: "I think the thermal imaging camera is a great idea. I am a big fan of bringing in more science to the show. If we can capture something on specialist equipment it would provide a very powerful argument that there really is something out there." Even Yvette Fielding's farts?

BadPsychics also wanted to know about allegations that various guests on the show who had their minds psychically 'read' by the likes of Acorah were actually plants whose life-details had potentially been researched beforehand, and that certain 'live' segments of *Most Haunted Live!* had actually been pre-recorded, something which the questioner argued "brings into doubt the validity" of the overall show, as some 'spontaneous' psychic revelations made may really have been pre-researched and pre-scripted. Selected 'live' sections of the show, in which on-site investigator Yvette Fielding was shown seemingly answering contemporaneous questions from Bull in the studio, were actually pre-recorded beforehand, alleged BadPsychics, making it difficult to conclude that Bull was not himself in on the wheeze. Confronted with such allegations, Bull pleaded the show had "less technical capability" during its early days, and therefore some scenes may indeed have been pre-recorded in this way, but that this was in no way suspicious. "I can't remember whether this scene was recorded, but if it was, it makes it no less valid," Bull argued, rather lamely. [4]

I have no idea whether Dr Bull's professed belief in ghosts is genuine or not, and to what extent he was or was not involved in any potential misleading of naïve viewers of *Most Haunted* back in the day. But neither do I particularly care. Call me old-fashioned, but I tend to vote for politicians mainly on the basis of their Party manifestos, not whether or not they have been strangled by demons. Anyway, he probably has Richard Madeley's vote…

NOTES

1 https://metro.co.uk/2021/10/25/richard-madeley-convinced-he-saw-ghost-at-home-in-creepy-encounter-15481332/; www.indy100.com/viral/richard-madeley-ghost-story-gmb-b1949023.

2 www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/2067179/reform-chairman-tells-susanna-reid; www.facebook.com/GMB/videos/some-things-happened-that-i-cannot-explain-reform-uks-new-chairman-dr-david-bull/1394912791630198/; https://uk.news.yahoo.com/reform-chair-david-bull-calls-111803701.html

3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Bull_(politician); https://uk.news.yahoo.com/david-bull-former-doctor-presenter-123738071.html-

4 www.badpsychics.com/2015/07/badpsychics-classic-that-time-we-caught.html

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

ForteanTimes

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Deciphering the cryptic

Jerry Glover enjoys two studies of weird and wonderful manuscripts from Hildegard to Voynich, considers the Why and the What, and marvels at the rabbit holes that cryptographers venture into

Cryptic

From Voynich to the Angel Diaries, the Story of the World's Mysterious Manuscripts

Garry J Shaw

Yale University Press 2025
Hb, 352pp, £25, ISBN 9780300266511

Voynich Reconsidered

The Most Mysterious Manuscript in the World

Robert H Edwards

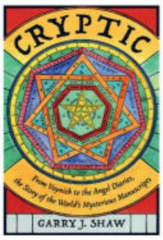
Schiffer Publishing 2024
Hb, 336pp, £45.99, ISBN 9780764367496

Here are two fine books on the thrilling subject of mysterious manuscripts. While one takes a more narrative approach, the other delves deeply into attempts to analyse a totemic cryptographic enigma, a manuscript whose reputation for mystery dwarfs other, no less interesting works, despite their relative obscurity in the fortean and crypto-spheres.

In *Cryptic* we go on brisk forays through key stages in the lives of cryptographers and the later journeys of their manuscripts from Hildegard of Bingen to the alchemical texts of Michael Maier and Heckius six centuries later. To conclude, Shaw summarises the intellectual and commercial background to probably the most interrogated of them all, the Voynich Manuscript, giving his tentative opinion as to its purpose, which I might be more than half convinced of had I not read *Voynich Reconsidered*.

Shaw looks at the works of people whose lives were so peculiar and creative it would be difficult to invent them. The youthful Giovanni Fontana frankensteined a devilish cryptid to frighten a monk, showing a precocious engineering talent that developed in code-drenched 15th-century Venice. Out of his precocious talents came *Bellicorum instrumentorum liber*, an enciphered catalogue of war inventions that made Leonardo's look almost prosaic. Fear-intentioned inventions included clockwork-driven skeletons and a mechanical devil with small explosives thrown by springs. There are rocket-propelled animals: a hare on a "skateboard" flying towards ramparts. The cipher wasn't complex, but as fiendish as Fontana's humour.

Johann Heidenberg, aka Trithemius, was a zealous anti-witch Benedictine who quested across Europe for occult books like a cross between a true-life bibliophile and a videogame mage. He made St Martin's Monastery Germany's greatest place of learning, so manuscript-obsessed he condemned the printing press despite later using it copiously, and taught his dog some Greek. *Steganographia*, his uncompleted opus of secret message communication, sealed his place in the magico-cryptic annals for its fusion of magic and codes to summon spirit entities from hierarchies both nice and nasty: proper Crowlean magick. This got Trithemius into trouble so he abandoned it. His later *Polygraphia*, the first printed cryptographic work, dealt with secret writing. He "discovered" the Emperor Maximillian's "Trojan" heritage in an early case of faking history for money.

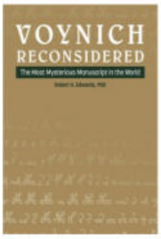


Compellingly retold are the antics of his spiritual successors, John Dee and Edward Kelly, as are the histories of even more obscure and dubious texts like the Turpiana Tower parchment that baffled 16th-century Granada. And the Rohonc Codex, the archly-billed "second most mysterious manuscript in the world".

> *The youthful Giovanni Fontana frankensteined a devilish cryptid to frighten a monk*

Given how well it flows, each chapter having enough character and history to be a standalone book on Europe's most committed crypto-occultists, this seems quite a short book at just 250 illustrated pages, plus notes.

Voynich Reconsidered is an analytical *tour de force*. Even though the details can overwhelm, its good ordinary prose, splendid colour layouts and umpteen tables of correspondences are mesmerisingly focused. The studies of earlier attempts at decipherment, and new ones of the author's own avenues, which seem promising, are cogently presented.



The product of five scribes working for some uber-inscrutable purpose, the Voynich Manuscript, cryptography's holy mountain, is an outlier. At first appearing quite accessible with its dreamlike illustrations of plants, female bathers, peculiar apparatus, we get the gist – sort of. Then there's the… they *are* words, aren't they? The text looks decipherable… right? Unknown, for these apparently simple concepts are stress-tested to their limits with deciphering efforts. Is the Voynich an alchemical or magical grimoire or a medical manual? Poem or pharmaceutical? Or some combination? Why do its "letters" and "words" look so much like bits of known languages that don't stack up to complete phrases? The lack of punctuation doesn't help one bit. The author suggests some of it corresponds to particular ancient Balkan languages, that is, if indeed it really isn't utter gibberish, a hoax; a possibility ruled out by Edwards with "some degree of confidence". The only Voynich conference sponsored by an academic institution, in 2022, generally favoured the opinion that the Voynich text is meaningful. The producer must have been wealthy, an aristocrat or high clerical official. Someone who may, Edwards admits, have had "a colossal sense of humour".

So what's the point of deciphering ancient esoteric manuscripts? Can they *really* tell us anything now actually worth knowing? Having lived above a repository of forgotten and even concealed scientific research, and charted a particularly obscure esoteric philosophy elsewhere, I'm convinced that the mediæval rediscovery of ancient knowledge unearthed real wisdom that we still haven't yet integrated into our worldview and purpose. Not all of this knowledge is written (a blindspot of esotericists who hyper-focus on the written word). Yet since some books may well do so it is worth trying to decipher these manuscripts.

The storytelling in Shaw's book and the rigorous, clear presentation in Edwards' makes them eminently worth reading; if only to wonder at their rabbit holes and which of them ambitious cryptographers might brace themselves to venture into.

Cryptic ★★★★★
Voynich ★★★★★

Baths, Booze, Bonking

Barry Baldwin looks at naughty goings-on in ancient Greece and Rome

Miracula

Weird and Wonderful Stories of Ancient Greece and Rome

Paul Chrystal

Reaktion Books 2025

Hb, 472pp, £18, ISBN 9781836390497

Paul Chrystal enters a crowded field. No mention (surprise?) of the three collections by JC McKeown (reviewed by me in FT268, 309, 357), nor Anthony Kaldellis's Byzantine anthology, not even the one by Philip Matyszak who here contributes a foreword (grossly misdating Athenæus).

However, Chrystal triumphs in terms of sources and detailed narratives, written in clear prose (no academic jargon) with gusto and humour – I especially liked his verdict on feminine foot-aided masturbation: “Pedicure to end all pedicures”.

Vast introductory survey of primary sources includes such unlikely ones as Augustine. However, he seems to miss arguably the most “fortean” of ancient collections, namely *The Book of Prodigies* by late-Roman Julius Obsequens, annual lists extracted from Livy of events strange enough to make even Fort's head reel. Happily, there is an online translation.

Chrystal defiantly combats age-old books by JC Stobart on Greek Glory and Roman Grandeur, once canonical, now (I hope) read by nobody. His frequent quoting of a Latin epigram, “Baths, Booze, Bonking destroy bodies but make life”, suggests a strong hedonistic credo.

There are 11 subdivided sections of chosen topics, plus Epilogue. Many readers may probably gravitate first to Sex, where details abound of every conceivable and inconceivable preference and variation, plus one rightly dubbed “disturbing” on female genital mutilation, showing this atrocity not restricted to Africa, as many think.

Chrystal claims to have solved an age-old mystery: why are Greek gods' penises so small? In an earlier book, *In Bed with the Ancient Greeks* (2016), quoting Aristophanes (*Clouds*) on the perfect male physique, he suggests a deliberate contrast with the bestial Satyrs' (as called in Victorian pornography) “titanic doodles”. Here, Chrystal seems (vague wording) to argue for a distancing by the Olympians from the mightily-hung Priapus (basically a Roman scarecrow); no mention here of Roman matrons pleasuring themselves on his colossal organ.

“Agalmatophilia”, probably not in everybody's vocabulary, denotes sexual attraction to statues. Chrystal traces the term back to Krafft-Ebing (1886). Various websites adduce modern cases.

There are a few stray errors. Nero did not nocturnally invade Roman streets in search of big cocks; he was “into” muggings and punch-ups. Lucian's proverb “Scrub an Ethiopian White” occurs in a pamphlet, not a poem – see Jean Massing's amusing online article on how this bled into modern soap advertising.

Chrystal attempts to prove Julius Cæsar “an effeminate homosexual”. This is based on his soldiers' marching-song ridiculing his erotic diplomacy in the Bithynian king's bed. But another such song heralds his rampant womanising, whilst a political rival berates him as “every woman's husband”. “Bisexual” is the correct designation, as with many of his successors.

A breath-taking assembly of ancient sources, unlikely to be bettered.

★★★★★

Holy Men of the Electromagnetic Age

A Forgotten History of the Occult

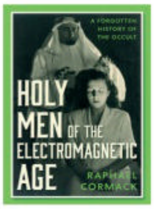
Raphael Cormack

Hurst Publishers 2025

Hb, 304pp, £25, ISBN: 9781805262749

This is an excellent twin biography of a mystic who played at being Eastern in the West, and another who played at being Western in the East.

Tahra Bey was an Armenian refugee (and relative of Charles Aznavour!) who misleaingly marketed himself as an Egyptian fakir in 1920s Paris, stabbing himself onstage with no pain or blood, or burying himself alive before entering a state of voluntary hibernation. Pictures of the fake fakir resemble Lawrence of Arabia, dressed somewhat inappropriately for an “Egyptian”, but Tahra Bey's clients didn't seem to realise, one “Oriental” being equally as exotic as another back then. His feats of stagecraft were amazing, but even more amazing were his feats of self-mythologising. Did he really bewitch an angry street-mob into chasing his phantom, not his own true self one day? Could he really hypnotise customs guards to allow him to cross international borders at will? The fact he was expelled from France in 1938 for various acts of petty fraud suggests not.



Even better was one Dr Dahesh (“Dr Astonishing”), who established his own rival Spiritualist sect in Lebanon appealing to Western fringe sciences of the day, like hypnotism and parapsychology, to convince the natives of his modern-sounding worth; he invoked a spirit named “The Great Raymond”, apparently the dead son of the famed English scientist-cum-Spiritualist Sir Oliver Lodge.

Dahesh's reported miracles were indeed astonishing, if true. He walked on water, made water wine and returned from the dead, like Jesus. Unlike Jesus, he also made a painting of Beethoven come alive and play a piano, removed his head and left it in a queue whilst his body walked elsewhere to avoid waiting, engaged in fist-fights with his own doppelgänger, and summoned smoky *djinn*. Christ resurrected Lazarus, but Dahesh reanimated his deceased pet parrot – John Cleese take note. Dahesh actually started out as a slavish stage imitator of Tahra Bey's bed-of-nails fakir conjuring act, but dressed as a comedy English aristocrat in bow-tie and suit, not a comedy fake sheikh. Yet some of his feats remain hard to explain; when one disciple boasted of her chastity, he instantly apported a roll of photos showing her riding a lover. Internal Lebanese political intrigues eventually did for this so-called “Arab Rasputin”, but given his equal enthusiasms for thaumaturgy and alleged sexual abuse, perhaps he should really have been known as the “Arab Sai Baba”? Or maybe the “Arab Criswell”, given his unfulfilled prophecy that Adolf's secret son Helmut Hitler would nuke the world into oblivion in the 1990s.

Raphael Cormack has done a superb job rescuing the legend of these two now-forgotten men. This highly enjoyable study of cross-cultural magical pollination ably demonstrates that, when it comes to the occult, East is East, and West is West, and ever the twain shall meet.

SD Tucker

★★★★★

Flatline Constructs

Gothic Materialism and Cybernetic Theory-Fiction

Mark Fisher

Zer0 Classics/Collective Ink 2025

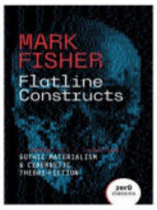
Pb, 264pp, £14.99, ISBN 9781803417851

Mark Fisher was a brilliant communicator of cultural and critical theory, with a penchant for science fiction, the Gothic and weird fiction. He died in 2017, and his sudden loss snatched away a rare talent for combining fierce Marxist theory with always unexpected readings of popular literature, film and music. He became known through his early adoption of the blog and then for his volumes for Zer0 Books, a radical publisher he helped found.

We have had Fisher's posthumous lectures and a doorstop sampler of his blog posts. *Flatline Constructs* is Fisher's doctoral thesis, which he wrote at the somewhat legendary Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at Warwick University at the end of the 1990s. At the

CCRU, the theory was high – but not nearly as high as CCRU staff, who experimented with mixing continental philosophy and lots of amphetamines. It was kicked off campus and eventually shut down.

If you are energised by a kind of delirious rush of French Post-Structuralist theory, this book is for you. Fisher takes the idea of "flatline construct" from William Gibson's cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* and mashes it together with the terminally hip media theory of Jean Baudrillard and the gnomic anti-theory of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Fisher used this fusion to create a "theory-fiction" of his own, not so much interpreting works by William Burroughs, JG Ballard or David Cronenberg but rather oddly inhabiting and extending them. In this vision, selves are dissolved and re-envisaged as flatline constructs dispersed through cybernetic networks.



Remember Fisher was writing in the fairly early days of Internet communication and before *The Matrix*. There's an ecstatic embrace of dissolution here that reflects the kind of utopianism that has long since been drained away by the rightward-turn of California's tech bros and their relentless capture and monetisation of the web.

The genre of the doctorate is an insular discourse at the best of times, usually written for an audience of two: the examiners. Soon after completing his thesis, Fisher began to lead a precarious life teaching in the margins of further education colleges and universities, but he also seized on the possibilities of the new form of the blog to push outside closed systems of academic professional language. In these pieces, he found a way of translating this arcane philosophy into punchy, angry and often bitingly funny posts. But this is the motherlode, if you want it, the start of it all: a theory-fiction of post-Spinozist immanence, post-structuralism and post-post-modernism, speaking to us from inside the machine like the visionary prophet Professor O'Blivion from Cronenberg's *Videodrome*.

Roger Luckhurst

★★★

Vatican Spies

From the Second World War to Pope Francis

Yvonnick Denoël, tr Alan McKay

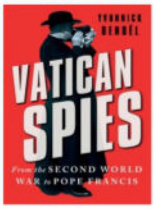
Hurst Publishers 2024

Hb, 384pp, £25, ISBN 9781911723400

In *Vatican Spies*' concluding chapter Yvonnick Denoël writes "it would be idle to make definitive judgements of what 'Vatican Spies' are." He abides by this dictum throughout the book.

Vatican agents secretly delivered the papal letter "With Burning Concern" to the German bishops in 1937 and this admonishment to Hitler was read during Mass, resulting in 304 priests being sent to Dachau. The Vatican diplomat, Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty, used the Vatican and its institutions in Rome to shelter escaped Allied soldiers and airmen; at the height of his operation he housed over 1,000 personnel. The Vatican itself hid 6,000 Jews during the Nazi occupation of Rome.

Sadly, in the post-war era the Vatican provided escape routes for war criminals, the San Girolamo monastery in Rome providing a hub. Visas, cash, logistics – all enabled not just Nazis but also Croatian Ustasha members (including priests) guilty of mass murder to escape to South America. To "save Italy from Communism" the Vatican collaborated with the CIA under James Angleton, funnelling money to the Christian Democrats and mobilising 300 bishops, 125,000 priests and five million members of Catholic Action to ensure their victory in the 1948 election. More damning was the involvement of Vatican clerics in the Gladio Network: churches were used to hide weapons and explosives. These armaments were used during attempts to politically destabilise Italy over the next 40 years.



Opus Dei had members in the cabinets of Pinochet and the Argentine Junta. Fr Ferrari, who spied on Opus Dei in Latin America, survived two poisoning attempts. He was found dead of a heart attack on the Geneva-Paris train just before he was due to pass documents on to a journalist. Perhaps an albino monk was tracking him...

Pope John Paul II was successful in establishing intelligence and logistics networks in Poland. Before the CIA was active in supporting Solidarnosc, his agents were supplying the union with resources. Under John Paul II the Vatican was less interested in opposing repression in South America; when Archbishop Romero was murdered while celebrating Mass, it remained silent.

The Vatican bank, Instituto per le Opere di Religione, deserves a book of its own. Suffice to say that Roberto Calvi had been involved in selling Exocet missiles to Argentina. It might explain why no one noticed when he was hanged from Blackfriars bridge in London in 1982.

Vatican Spies doesn't quite do what it says on the tin. It is a wide ranging survey of the Vatican and associated clerics' involvement in politics and scandals since the 1930s. But it is an entertaining and enlightening read.

Páiric Ó Corráin

★★★★

The Celts

A Modern History

Ian Stewart

Princeton University Press 2025

Hb, 576pp, £35, ISBN 9780691222516

The Celts loom large in popular narratives of European history, whether as foes of the Roman empire or as ancestors of modern nations. But there haven't always been "Celts" in the way that we understand them – or at least the idea of "Celts" in its modern sense hasn't always existed.

For a long time, Irish scholars resisted the idea that Irish was a Celtic language or that the Irish people were Celts, which seems bizarre to the modern eye. Similarly, German historians and linguists in the early modern period argued strongly in favour of their own nation's Celtic language and identity, which wouldn't be the case today. And although the idea of Celts – Celtic nations, Celtic peoples, and so on – persists in popular culture, modern scholars aren't so sure there is a single Celtic culture to discuss.

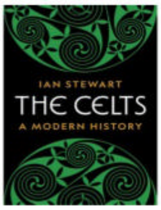
Ian Stewart's *The Celts* is a history not of the Celts themselves – if such a thing ever existed – but of the *idea* of Celts, of Celtic languages, Celtic history, Celtic peoples and the nebulous Celtic spirit.

Starting with antiquity, Stewart traces the changing history of the idea, encompassing all of Europe but focusing mainly on Britain, Ireland, France and Germany.

Over the centuries, ideas of Celtic language and identity changed dramatically, and Stewart looks at the linguists, antiquarians, archæologists, artists and activists whose work refined and revolutionised this concept.

Topics covered range from the literary controversy over the poems attributed to the alleged ancient bard Ossian to the use of racist theories of Celtic inferiority to justify British rule of Ireland.

Although the idea of Celtic identity is one that has played an important role in popular culture, *The Celts* isn't especially concerned with this aspect of its history. This is mainly an intellectual history, although that necessarily crosses over with popular Celticism in a few places, such as the impact of Walter Scott's highland theatrics on the public idea of Scotland's role within the United Kingdom.



Unavoidably, it also digs into politics, including the importance (or otherwise) of Celticist ideas to the struggle for Irish self-determination and the role of one group of Breton nationalists in collaborating with the Nazi occupation.

The Celts is a detailed history, unafraid to dig into the minutiæ of academic controversies or the agendas of relatively short-lived organisations. Its ideal reader is someone either very interested in the history of Celtic studies or looking for a detailed explanation of how an idea that many take for granted grows and develops over centuries. Despite its heft and detail, it's a readable, engaging account of the ups and downs of an idea that has had a huge impact not only on British and Irish culture but on the world.

James Holloway

★★★★★

Making the same mistakes

This study of conspiracy theories identifies some important problems, but is a weak analysis, relies on old data and falls into a number of traps

Conspiracy Theory

The Story of an Idea; An Origin Story Book

Ian Dunt & Dorian Lynskey

Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2024
Pb, 192pp, £10.99, ISBN 9781399612869

We hear a lot about conspiracy theories lately. Certainly, they have existed almost as far back as recorded history goes, but in the last decade they have attracted unprecedented attention from news outlets.

Much of this attention is most likely due to the rhetoric of prominent politicians, many of whom have, for the last decade, used conspiracy theories to build coalitions and generate support, in a way not seen previously in our lifetimes.

Consider, for example, the use of conspiracy theories by Trump and his acolytes in 2016: they deployed numerous conspiracy theories accusing the political establishment of all manner of sins. This use of conspiracy theories has continued to this day and is not confined to either Trump or the United States. So, for those of us who are older than 25, the place of conspiracy theories in society appears, at least, to have enlarged.

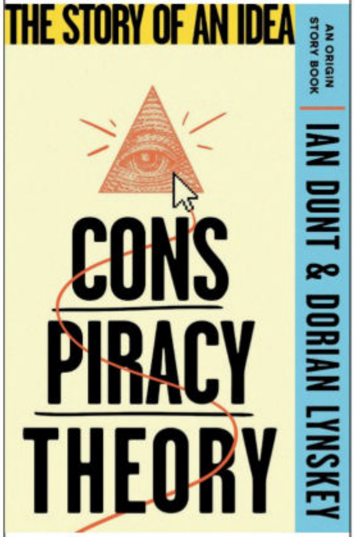
Just as journalists have shone a light on the topic in recent years, so have academic researchers. After publishing thousands of studies, we now have a much better understanding of why people believe in conspiracy theories and why they might act on them than we did, say in 2000. But, even with all of the scholarly attention, there remains much to learn.

For example, many of the scientific findings from only a decade ago, some of which form the foundation of the academic literature, are beginning to be questioned, or in some cases, overturned.

Thus, the science of conspiracy theories has moved far slower than desired by journalists, commentators and the public.

This has left journalists and observers wanting to say things about conspiracy theories – after all, they are a topic that audiences want to hear about – but without having the necessary body of knowledge to support many of the claims that might feel true.

Ironically, this has left many of the well-intending people who write about conspiracy theories making the same mistakes they accuse conspiracy theorists of. For example, journalists have been quick to make claims about the popularity of various conspiracy theories (i.e. it's the golden age of conspiracy theories) without solid data to back them up. This is quite ironic, given that much of the concern about conspiracy theories is that they lack evidence and are probably (though not necessarily) false.



In *Conspiracy Theory: The Story of an Idea*, Ian Dunt and Dorian Lynskey fall into a similar trap. Many things about conspiracy theories that feel true to them, probably lack evidence, or aren't true in most instances.

For example, they seem to argue that conspiracy theories (i.e. ideas) have agency and that they are addictive. I am not sure the available evidence supports such claims.

They open with the claim that conspiracy theories in the 1990s were "cosy", but they seem to forget, at least until a few pages in, about violent incidents like the 1995 Oklahoma city bombing, which was partially motivated by conspiracy theories.

They express concern over the powerful politicians who use conspiracy theories for power, but seem to prefer blaming the conspiracy theories themselves, as if they had agency, for the actions of the politicians and not the other way around.

They conjure up a popular caricature of a "conspiracy theorist" without defining that term clearly or examining whether such a caricature is an appropriate depiction of most believers.

Perhaps most ironically, Dunt and Lynskey accuse conspiracy theories of always blaming a "they" for the world's problems but then themselves keep accusing some undefined "they" – I guess conspiracy theories or conspiracy theorists – of being responsible for the world's problems.

Conspiracy Theory: The Story of an Idea moves quickly and is well-written. However, much of what is there is old. Despite supposedly living through a resurgence of conspiracy theories, they spend a lot of time on dated conspiracy theories, like ones about the JFK assassination (which have decreased in belief over time, at least in the US).

And, despite there being hundreds of new studies on the topic coming out every year, they rely on very little of the recent academic literature, instead focusing on findings that are out of date.

In the end, I believe they identify important problems in society, warn of further dangers, and propose a number of potential causes, but never fully put those together into a coherent narrative.

Joseph E Uscinski

★★★

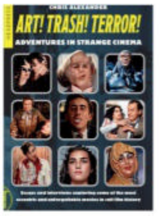
Art! Trash! Terror!

Adventures in Strange Cinema

Chris Alexander

Headpress 2024
Pb, 453pp, £23.99, ISBN 9781915316431

Collecting over 150 reviews and interviews, *Art! Trash! Terror!* is generously illustrated with stills and posters devoted to horror and exploitation films. Chris Alexander cut his journalistic teeth as editor-in-chief of *Fangoria*, so writes on cult films with authority – and also accessibly, with a fan's enthusiasm. Arranged alphabetically, some entries are reprinted from magazines, while others are new. He justifies his selection with a focus on their strangeness and emotional resonance, but with no rationale and no overarching thesis the contents feel arbitrary. The result is none the worse for that: the book's strength lies in its eclectic love for the weirder corners of film history, familiar and obscure.



The trash and terror in the title are givens, but Alexander makes a good case for regarding many of the films he covers to be art, though the term "masterpiece" is overused. While he is generous in his assessments, he is not uncritical, but even when he notes weaknesses he attempts to find something positive to say. He is keen to rehabilitate films dismissed by critics on release which he thinks merit reassessment.

Interspersed with his reviews, impressively Alexander has snagged some high-profile interviewees, including Werner Herzog, John Waters, Joe Dante and not least Nicolas Cage, who amply confirms his reputation for eccentricity. The author has a fondness for British scream queens, paying particular attention to Hammer's output, and he is also strong on the European scene.

Unfortunately, editorially the book has been so poorly proofread it is possible Headpress printed an earlier draft in error, but the defects of presentation are partially redeemed by the quality of the illustrations and an excellent index. Alexander frequently urges readers to seek out films he discusses, and his advice is worth following.

Tom Ruffles

★★★★

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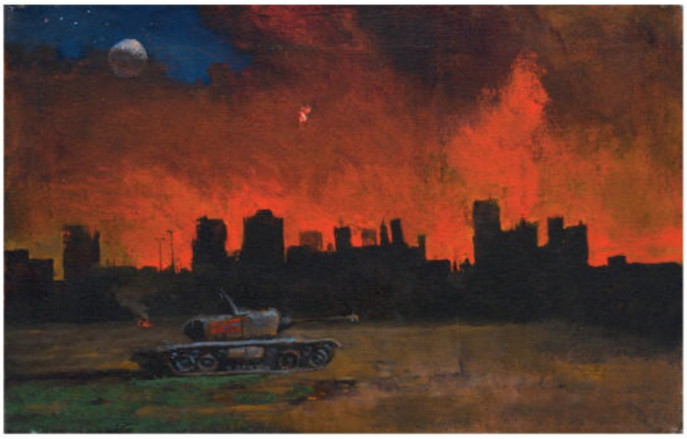
Dark side of the art

A new documentary confirms the idea that Thomas Kinkade, the famously kitschy 'Painter of Light', had a vault filled with dark and disturbing works at odds with his wholesome public image



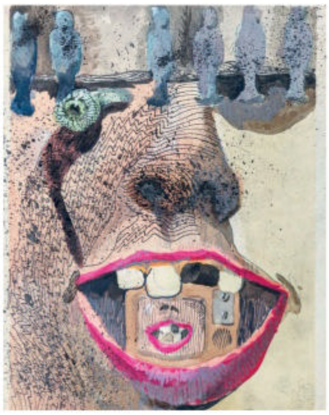
Art for Everybody

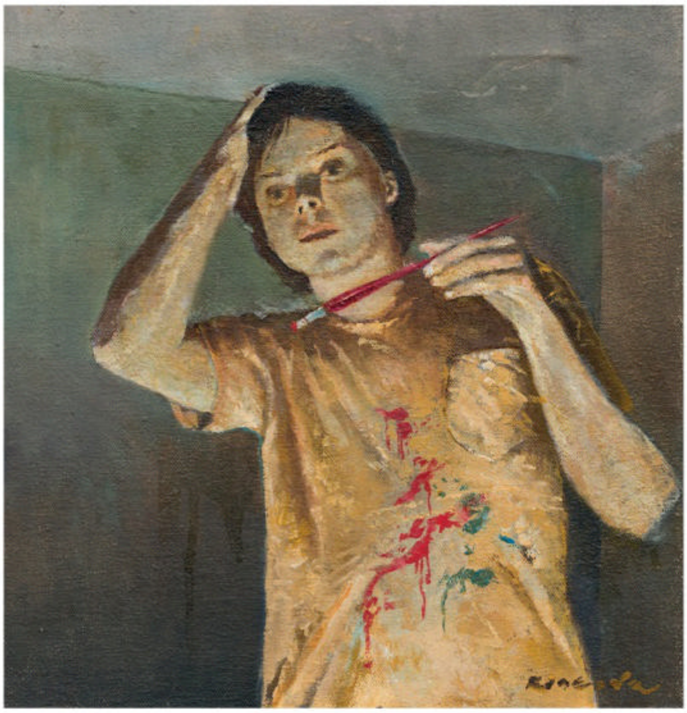
Dir Miranda Yousef, US 2025
Digital platforms

Shortly after Thomas Kinkade died from an overdose of valium and booze in April 2012, LA artist and FT regular Jeffrey Vallance had a dream in which Kinkade showed him a secret vault of disturbing artwork that ran counter to the wholesome, uplifting image cultivated around the 'Painter of Light' and his artwork during his lifetime [see **FT416:36-41** for the full, strange story]. To Vallance's astonishment, when he recounted the dream to Kinkade's family during a symposium on kitsch a few years later, it turned out that the vault really existed, and indeed contained a motherlode of non-canonical Kinkades.

In Miranda Yousef's new documentary on Kinkade, *Art for Everybody*, Vallance tells the story of his prophetic dream again, and she uses the vault and its contents as a metaphor for Kinkade's barely repressed darker side, and the toll his industrialised and sanitised version of professional painting took on himself, his family, his business partners and his legions of fans. Piecing together Kinkade's career from talking heads, archival footage and the full cooperation of his widow and four daughters, *Art for Everybody* doesn't break any new cinematic ground, but is a tightly constructed narrative.

The real shocker is how accomplished a painter Kinkade actually was





Vallance befriended Kinkade while organising the museum-scaled exhibit "Thomas Kinkade: Heaven on Earth" at Cal State Fullerton's Grand Central Art Center in 2004 – a testament to Vallance's uncanny ability to insinuate himself into unlikely situations and make improbable connections, such as trading neckties with Anwar Sadat, curating contemporary art exhibits at The Liberace Museum, delivering XXXL scuba flippers to the King of Tonga, and so on.

If you are unfamiliar with Kinkade, the incongruity stems from the fact that his paintings are overtly, even militantly sentimental: detailed, workmanlike renditions of traditional landscapes, inhabited by homely cottages and stone lighthouses, neatly bisected by babbling brooks and waterfalls, and track-lit from heaven through a conveniently parting storm-front. It was guesstimated that one in 20 American homes contained a Kinkade artefact, which encompassed anything from a hand-retouched limited-edition print to coffee mugs, collector plates, date-books and customised La-Z-Boy recliners.

Kinkade grew up poor in Placerville, California, about 40 miles east of Sacramento, attended Berkeley, then ArtCenter in Pasadena. After graduating, he landed a job painting backgrounds for animator Ralph Bakshi's cinematic collaboration with artist Frank Frazetta, *Fire and Ice*. Bakshi is the most entertaining interviewee: "From what I gather, if you like Kinkade you're an asshole. Well, I guess I'm an asshole." This period of Kinkade's life is the most revelatory, with snapshots of the artist in *Rocky Horror* drag, stories of mental breakdowns and the most intriguing of the previously unknown work that was discovered in his vault.

While the artist's shady business deals, debilitating alcoholism, sexual assaults, bizarre alter egos and family-unfriendly outbursts (like pissing on a Winnie the Pooh statue in Disneyland or yelling "Codpiece! Codpiece!" during a Siegfried & Roy performance in Vegas) are documentary gold, the real shocker for most visually literate viewers will be how accomplished a painter Kinkade actually was.

Many of his undergrad paintings are tortured self-portraits in the familiar

TELEVISION

FT's couch potatoes, **STU NEVILLE & RUTH MORRIS** assess the small screen's current fortean offerings

The challenge? To find a paranormal programme that bucks the usual trend of running around in low light for a night, shrieking, hooting and hearing noises before clearing off into the grey dawn looking traumatised. We need something different. Something with a bit of tenacity, a bit cleverer. The gauntlet thus thrown down (which turns out in this case to be a sandal, but it is leather and goes on an extremity, so it'll pass), the sword was picked up (we'll come to that) and the quest begins.

My Haunted Project (Prime) features hotel proprietor and emeritus fish-pedicurist Harry Achilleos, investigator Danny Moss and techie Dan Callaghan rigging up one of the most reputedly haunted hotels in Cheshire with cameras and microphones, recording everything everywhere for a couple of years, whilst charging punters to patronise said hotel in the hope of directly experiencing said weirdness. This is a worthy premise. The rooms have been redecorated to be era-appropriate, although this appears to mean they've been dressed for a Sisters of Mercy concert, complete with black veils, and the corridors lined with suggestively draped dust sheets.

The doll is so virulent that it has to be kept chained up in a Perspex box

In the nursery, raps and knocks issue from behind a false wall. Unfortunately, investigation of what's behind it is verboten as it is a "Listed Building", so they can't even drill little holes without permission, despite the erection in another room of a huge neon cross, clearly bolted into an alcove, which we strongly suspect is not an original feature. However, the listed status proves no obstacle to this tenacious team as Dan C pulls the short straw (being the shortest) and is promptly stuffed into the attic and dangled Tom Cruise style over the void armed with a comically long drill bit and a plumber's endoscope.

Other inconsistencies include the team's stating that if an elderly sword, found under the floorboards, was removed from the building then woe would betide the establishment, before promptly hoicking it to over to a university for scientific examination (spoiler: woe does not betide).

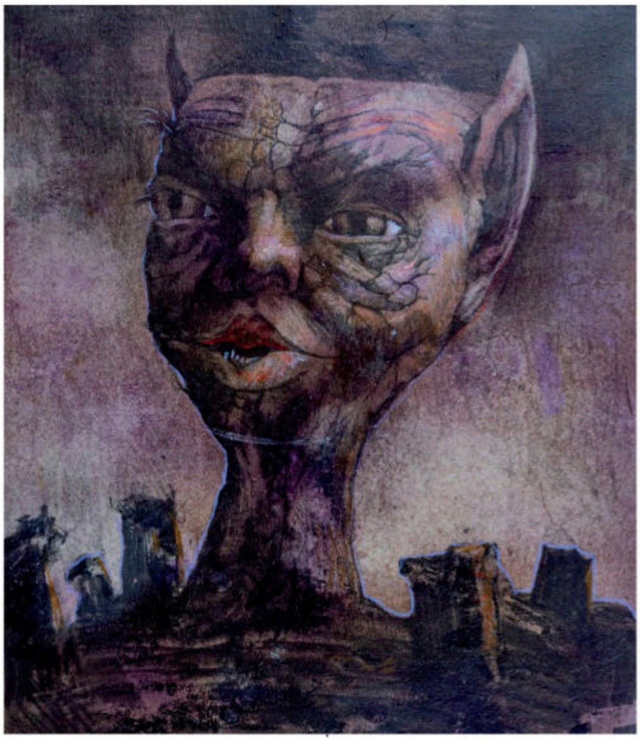
Harry says he doesn't believe in haunted dolls, despite having filled the hotel with dolls and dedicating a whole episode to 'Bungee Barbie, the Doll who won't stay on her shelf'. Displeased with the underperformance of the resident dolls, Danny imports one allegedly so virulent that it has to be kept chained up in a Perspex box, bearing an uncanny resemblance to the plastic vivarium in which David Blaine was suspended over the Thames.

All this said, there is some quite compelling evidence in the form of shadow figures, disembodied voices and knocks, self-opening doors and some genuinely intriguing noises; however, mindful that this is still a going concern, they are careful to point out that the investigation is far from over.

Expect series two and more bookings as the holiday season approaches!

Degenerate Art mode. "I want to paint the truth," he says in a contemporaneous audio journal, "and the truth of this world is not happiness. The truth of this world is pain, and that's the only truth." But he's also a stylistic chameleon, knocking out underground-cartoonish paintings or Gustave Caillebotte homages at the drop of a beret.

This, in turn, forces us to reconsider Kinkade's primary œuvre – the oversaturated, over-articulated nostalgia-curdled landscapes – as a deliberate conceptually based æsthetic strategy, rather than someone earnestly trying and failing to be Albert Bierstadt. Of course, this won't be enough for everyone. The always droll Pulitzer-Prize-winning *LA Times* critic Christopher Knight, brought in as resident nay-sayer, doesn't miss a beat when shown some of Kinkade's early work: "He should've stuck with it."



Ultimately, *Art for Everybody* comes across as a cautionary tale about the conflation of artistic ambition with the capitalist myth of infinite (and mandatory) economic growth. Which may also have been part of the artist's intention. "His paintings are a brilliant look at America," asserts Bakshi. "He's really painting his feelings about the cheapness of our society as it becomes more greedy and hungry. Those paintings belong in the Metropolitan Museum of Art as far as I'm concerned." I wouldn't bet a million bucks on that, but maybe they'll work up the nerve to screen this moving and challenging documentary.

Doug Harvey

★★★★☆

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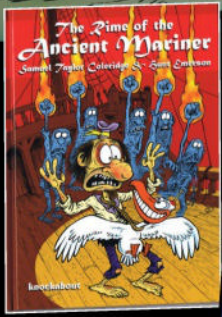
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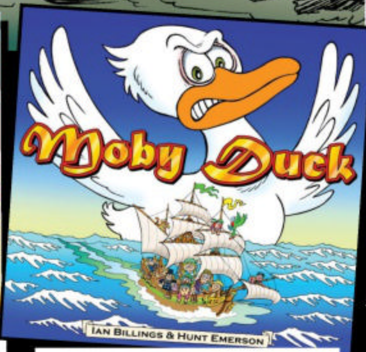
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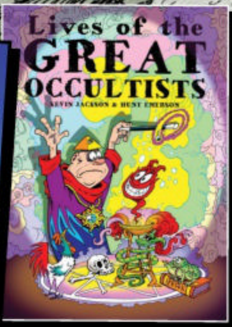
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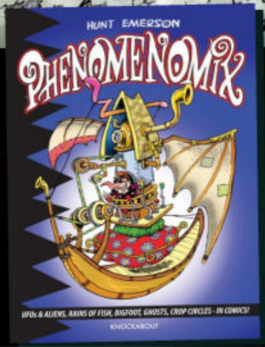
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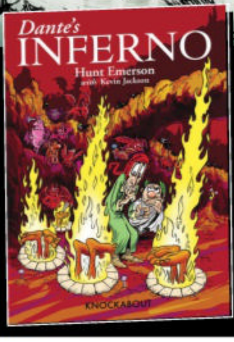
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Airfield Encounter

In 2007 my parents visited RAF East Kirkby airfield in Lincolnshire. While in the large main hangar my mom had become totally engrossed in a long, framed photograph on one of the walls. It showed an entire squadron of men with a Lancaster Bomber, many of whom had been based at East Kirkby during World War II. A lot of the men in the photo were on the wings either side of the plane's fuselage and my mom thought it was a wonderful shot.

As she continued to study it she became aware of someone standing very close behind her, just by her left shoulder. She says it was unmistakable. She assumed it was my dad and so started to turn around to comment on the photo she was enjoying, only to find that there was no one there. This gave her a real fright as you can imagine. She is adamant that someone was there.

Later on in a local pub my parents got chatting to the barman and told him where they'd been that day. Completely unprompted, he told them that the airfield was known to be haunted, this confirmation giving my mom her second spine-chilling moment of the day!

Duncan Kaiser
Phuket, Thailand

Zizian cult

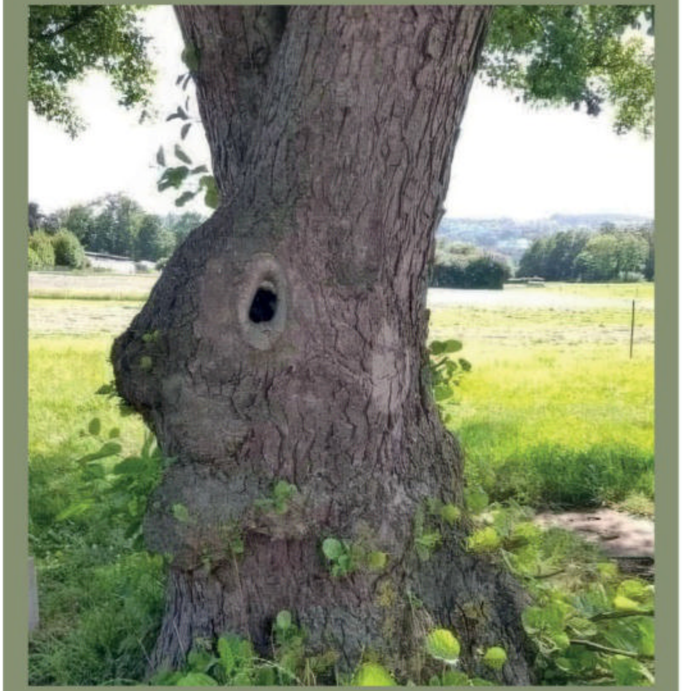
Many thanks for the Zizian cult report [**FT458:42-45**]. The information provided was interesting, and I congratulate FT for publishing, given many news operations are too fearful, despite the public interest, to report.

Noel Rooney poses the question 'Quite how (Silicon Valley) spawned… murderous vegans and terminal luddites is a mystery…' Seriously? Those who committed the heinous acts are human. Is it not obvious they are as capable of committing heinous acts as other members of our species? Why this is beyond Noel's comprehension is a far greater mystery! Or perhaps not. If Noel isn't fearful of getting on the wrong side those who share the extreme gender opinions of the Zizians, he should be.

Noel correctly notes there was little coverage in the media, but I believe his proffered excuse that the news "had a lot to compete with" is incorrect. Many news operations are fearful of being piled on, cancelled, boycotted, etc, if they report a LBGT-connected story with negative connotations. Doubtful? The majority, if not all, of the Zizians mentioned in the report self-identify as transgender. Yet the article didn't use the word 'trans' once in the article.

John Gray
Rendall, Orkney

SIMULACRA CORNER



A tree bunny put on Facebook by the Small Press Rescue Centre.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH** or to **sieveking@forteantimes.com**

Shock in Shugborough Hall

Rob Gandy's article about ghostly goings on at Shugborough Hall [**FT457:36-41**] brings back a memory. In 1967, when I was 21 and an electrician, I was sent to Shugborough Hall to modify and extend the fire alarm systems in the Staffordshire County Museum, which is housed in what was the stable block of the Hall. This involved entering all of the attic rooms above the place, with much unlocking of doors, and it was obvious that some of the rooms had not been entered for a considerable time.

Over the entrance the attic room was much higher than those next to it, and the opening to it was about seven feet [2m] above the floor level as I approached it. I was forced to jump up and grasp the sill of the doorway and pull myself up. On looking into the room, I saw the body of a man, lying on his back. I distinctly felt the hairs on the back of my neck prickle up for a split second. Then I realised that I was looking at one of those full-sized and full-weighted human dummies that used to be used in fire brigade competitions!

I ventured into almost all of the nooks and crannies of the Hall. Sadly, that was the nearest I approached to a spooky experience there.

Ian Thorpe
By email

Tooth transmissions

When transmissions generally used Amplitude Modulation rather than Frequency Modulation, it was possible in very rare situations for people to hear radio broadcasts in the strangest of ways, for example via a tooth filling [see **FT457:63**]. The reason for this is that the basic principle of demodulating the radio signal from its carrier wave was to use a diode. In the early days of radio a tuneable diode was made using a crystal and a cat's whisker wire. The junction between the wire and crystal formed the diode (it's like a one-way valve). It is possible for a metal tooth filling and its junction with the tooth to also form a crude diode and if all conditions are correct, the person can hear radio in their head. Diodes could also be formed by poorly soldered or mechanical connections in other appliances causing similar effects.

Julian Wiseman
By email

Phantom on film?

Following my letter 'Missed Opportunity' [**FT439:65**], I remembered another potential missed opportunity in my fortean researches. An article appeared in my local newspaper, the *Halifax Courier*, in 1973, with the title "Ghost was a Guest at the Wedding". It recounted how the uncle of a woman who was getting married at the Southowram Wesleyan Methodist Church, near Halifax, filmed the occasion on his camcorder. The uncle, who was identified as Derek Rhodes of Blackburn, said that on viewing the footage, he saw a woman in black with a veil covering her face, whom no one recognised as a guest of bride or groom, and whom no one could recall seeing at the time. The figure appeared to be talking and then allegedly faded away!

I phoned the church steward,

Francis Hotel, Bath

I read with great interest Andy Owens's letter on haunted locations in Bath and Bristol [**FT453:65**] and can add a few details on the Francis Hotel in Bath, which I contacted in January 2024 during research for a book on haunted hotels. Paige Clark, the reception manager, provided an information sheet on the hotel's history which is given to interested guests. Admittedly, some of the historical aspects sound like a simple repetition of local stories which may be confirmed or refuted by more research. The sheet talks of "The Grey Lady", said to be an actress from the 1880s who killed herself in the hotel after discovering that her husband had murdered her secret lover. She wears the same clothing from the night of her death after performing at the theatre – a grey feather dress. When she is seen, her perfume is said to hang in the air.

Poltergeist activity is blamed on the former housekeeper of John Wood, who designed and then occupied the building. She frittered away her inheritance due to gambling and while Wood took pity on her and employed her, she became depressed due to her addiction and hanged herself in the servants' quarters on the top floor. Her apparition has also been seen, described as a "dead housekeeper" by guests.

The document also describes an undated, but recent incident: "The guests in the room checked out early, saying that there was a 'presence' in the room, and that they wanted to leave the hotel immediately. They had been too afraid to take their belongings with them so asked the concierge to go and get them. The concierge described an intense pressure in the room, and an unusual feeling of claustrophobia. He noted while in the room that the curtains were open, and a towel was on the floor. When he returned to the room five minutes later to check it again, he discovered the curtains had been closed and the towel was folded on the bed. The housekeeping team had left an hour previously... When he checked the room again in the morning, he said the feeling of pressure was gone, but the curtains were now open again. That same evening, a receptionist stayed overnight to support the night team. She awoke in the middle of the night to an intense feeling of pressure bearing down on her, making it difficult to breathe. She grabbed her mobile phone to call for help but it did not respond to any button presses. After several long seconds the pressure subsided, and her phone began to function normally again."

> "During my time here I've had strange things happen that even as a sceptic I can't explain"

The fascinating document also talks of "Julia", to be seen in the small park at the centre of the square opposite the hotel wearing her wedding dress. Local legend has it that she still searches for the man who jilted her at the altar.

I was also contacted directly by Adrian De Waal of the night team, and he talked of the problems with the busts being moved which Mr Owens described in his letter. Mr De Waal also mentioned witnessing and hearing doors opening and closing on their own. The 100-year-old turnstile door has been seen on a few occasions to make a complete revolution by itself; normally staff try to laugh it off as due to the wind but this would seem not to be the case (as Mr De Waal told me: "As I write this email, there is a storm blowing a gale outside, I can hear it howling through the trees in Queen Square, [and] so far the door has not budged an inch.")

The doors to the Boho Marche restaurant swung back and forth one morning at 3am but stopped when he took his phone out to obtain footage. When he replaced his phone, "a shadow moved across the frosted glass window and the doors swung back and forth one more time before going quiet for the night."

De Waal said that the most recent experience was just the week before his email: "There was nothing that set the night apart from any other until it got to about 6am. My colleague and I were both sitting in reception finishing up some paperwork and chatting about how the shift had gone. I began to hear very faint music, so low that I assumed it was coming from my colleague's computer, but she soon asked me if I could hear music too. I told her I thought it was her and she confirmed that she thought it was me. We got up and started to look for the source of the music and we tracked it to one single solitary speaker in the No 10 bar next to reception... the whole sound system is connected and if one was on then all the speakers in the bar and the lobby should have been on. When I went to the back to check the sound system it was fully off. The music only stopped when I turned it on and off again. Having my phone in my pocket I was able to use the Shazam app to identify the song before I switched it off. The song that was playing on the one solitary speaker in the bar was titled, 'Feel Alive Again' by Molly Parden."

De Waal concluded his letter by saying: "During my time here I've had plenty of strange things happen that even as a sceptic I can't explain. Nothing alarming and nothing malevolent. One of my colleagues swears that she keeps feeling someone squeeze her shoulder reassuringly. I think whatever it is has the best interests of both guests and workers at heart and for all the strange stuff that happens, I have never been scared by it. I am just one of many that have had their own encounters at the Francis. From child-like whispers that stop when you do, to shadows that disappear down hallways. I've heard all kinds of strange stories working here."

Paul Lee
Kings Lynn, Norfolk

Arthur Coates, who was mentioned in the article, and he told me he hadn't seen the footage and had no contact details for Mr Rhodes or the married couple. I contacted the newspaper, who refused to give out personal contact details of the people involved (which was fair enough), and so I asked them to pass on my contact details to the couple and their uncle. Whether they did or not, I never got a reply.

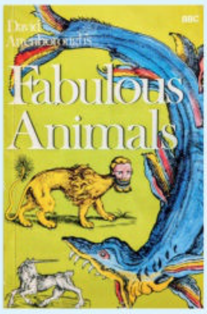
As a last resort, I wrote to the local newspapers in the Blackburn area asking for help in contacting Mr Rhodes, and even writing to everyone listed in the phone directory for Blackburn under the name 'Rhodes, D', and received only one reply, from a Mr Rhodes who had no connection to the man I was seeking.

The image of a woman on video who then fades away in full view just sounds too good to be true, and I can't help thinking it was some sort of mistake or hoax, but it was nowhere near April Fools' Day. I also thought it unlikely that journalists wouldn't follow up on a potential scoop like that.

I can't help feeling that somewhere, perhaps in an attic or cellar, there is a video cassette, forlorn and forgotten about, containing ground-breaking footage, just waiting to be unearthed and presented to the world of fortean research!

Andy Owens
Halifax, West Yorkshire

Fabulous Animals



Talk about fabulous fortean synchronicities (well someone might be?)....

Just after reading the forum article by Richard Freeman, "Fabulous Animals unearthed" [**FT458:48-49**] I happened to be in a local charity shop and immediately came across a cheap copy of the slim (80-page) paperback book which accompanied the BBC TV series, entitled *David Attenborough's Fabulous Animals*. I don't recollect ever having seen it before, and its striking cover is quite memorable. Co-authored by Molly Cox (who also produced the series and, perhaps more famously, *Play School* and *Jackanory*) the book was published by the BBC in 1975 and, as it states: "It is based on the BBC TV children's programme series." It contains six chapters which cover the same subject matter, and in the same sequence, as the scripts and episodes of the TV series. As Freeman wrote of the series, "It was all very simple..." and the same must be said of the book. However, it is worth reiterating that although the series was primarily and obviously, aimed at children (a point Freeman doesn't mention), that doesn't mean the material was presented in a condescending manner, as it might have been; far from it. It was obviously planned to be an exciting and serious introduction to cryptozoology for children, delivered by an expert in an engaging manner. And, taking into account that it has (unsurprisingly) dated somewhat in certain aspects over 50 years, that is exactly what it was – and still is.

It might be worth adding that at the time of writing, rather like its subject matter, the book itself appears to be something of an elusive and rare creature. And one that, if found, seems most of the time, to be inordinately expensive for what was originally a 50p book! So good luck and happy hunting, if you go seeking it – and maybe try your local charity shop first!

Bob Woosnam-Savage FSA
Otley, West Yorkshire

Gerald Gardner

In the gently supportive and very pleasantly uncritical interview of Rupert Russell by Cathi Unsworth [**FT458:28**] about Russell's postmodernish pastiche film *The Last Sacrifice*, there is a glaring and significant omission.

Neither participant in "The Pandora's Box of Paranoias" interview mentions that Gerald B Gardner – founder of modern Wicca – was consulted by the police about the Walton murder! Gardner's first book: *Witchcraft Today* – is cited in the interview but his second, 1959, book, *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, doesn't get a mention.

Gardner devoted most of Chapter XVI of the second book, which is entitled 'Some Allegations Examined, Part III' (pp. 268-292) to a very detailed, rational, sceptical and convincing explanation of the crime.

He puts it down to a local culture of superstition rather than any formal, organised group ritual killing. Mind you, Gardner offers no new suspects. Nevertheless, what this does mean is that there may still be interesting historical information about Gardner's contribution to the investigation to be found in his own archives or in police records.

There is little excuse for anyone seriously interested in the Walton murder to not know about Gardner's treatment of it. Both of Gardner's educational and highly entertaining books are available free to download in EPUB / .pdf format. For instance, I used https://zlib.pub/book/the-meaning-of-witchcraft-7pgib9c9dvg0 and https://zlib.pub/book/witchcraft-today-44n9qcf18260

Gardner was often accused of deliberate flamboyant attention-seeking in his support for Wicca, but in the later book he is being calmly balanced, being merely protective of his fellow religionists. Gardner's main targets are the publishers of the time, who, in order to sell newspaper and magazines, issued hostile, sensationalist articles, about witches engaging in ritual human sacrifice, devil-worship, black magic, sex magic etc. Could such terrible profit-oriented exploitation ever happen today ? :-}

Alan Lewis BSc BA MSc FCybS
Camberwell, London

Early Coca Consumption

In the Archæology column [**FT457:11**] there is a deeper question to be asked about the presence of coca in the brains of two Milanese citizens in the 17th century: how did two people from Milan gain access to coca leaves?

The historian of drugs, David Courtwright, argues that on transporting coca leaves over long sea voyages "the few leaves shipped to Europe lost potency", so shipping them picked meant they weren't effective as a drug. This limited coca's global reach until the discovery of the chemical extraction of the leaf we today call cocaine (Courtwright, 2002: 46). Richard Freeman also notes that the substance we know as cocaine, extracted from the coca plant in Germany in 1859, wasn't even widely made or globalised until around the 1880s (in Gootenberg (Ed.) 1999: Ch. 4).

So the question of where the Milanese accessed coca leaves is a mystery. Courtwright says that the Spanish conquistadores knew of the stimulating property of coca leaves, which they exploited to get more work out of workers in the silver mines. The Indigenous peoples of Peru had been chewing them for millennia, even processing the leaves with ash or lime to aid absorption of the stimulating alkali part of the leaves. (Courtwright, 2002: 46).

Therefore, were these people sailors, or were there coca leaves being cultivated in Italy? The cultivation of coca plants did expand near the end of the 19th century, mostly in Asia, but did sailors travelling to the Spanish colonies perhaps bring the plant back to Europe in the 17th century? This find definitely bears more study, perhaps in Spanish colonial records or archæologically.

Brian Gibb
Guelph, Ontario

Mike Jay responds:
I think the most likely explanation is that small batches of coca leaves may have arrived in Europe with some potency left in them, and have been used by a few people. The metabolites of cocaine are very distinctive, and can be identified at levels of even a few molecules – which is why we keep on getting news stories about cocaine traces in Egyptian mummies, on every bank note etc. etc. So even stale and weak coca would leave its trace.

There's no trace of coca in the Milan hospital records, so it obviously wasn't a regular medical/apothecary product – lots of commentary has suggested that this means it was taken 'recreationally', but there's no evidence for that. It could easily have been a small batch that a few people tried as a herbal remedy.

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

Holiday Haunting

My husband Luke and I love to take holidays in the Midwest of America exploring in our car. We've discovered many interesting places such as troll villages, Norwegian towns with midsummer festivals, and glass houses built on big rocks. One time we visited an old lead-mining town that was rich in history, and found a lovely inn. This was located next to the county court house and used to house overnight drunks. We decided to stay there, and spent a fun evening exploring the town and playing board games.

It must have been well past midnight when I was awoken by a group of seemingly drunken youths outside, shouting at one another in a boisterous manner. This was annoying, as I had been happily asleep. The next thing I knew, they were inside the inn, running up and down the stairs and trying all the doors, as if they couldn't remember which room they were staying in. I heard the rattling of our bedroom door, and then what sounded like two people get inside our room. There was a little lounge area round the corner from our bed, and I could hear a young man and woman there, discussing where they might find a bottle of water to drink. Suddenly I felt their presence round the end of the bed, at which point I sat up and shouted "Get out!" in an annoyed and angry voice, hoping to scare them away. This woke my husband up, and I fully came to and realised that there was no one there.

The following day, I thought about asking the innkeeper about the incident to see if anyone else had been disturbed in the night. I ultimately decided against it, although my husband did ask about any report of ghosts in the place (none were admitted to). I decided it must have been a waking dream.

The day after this, my husband and I went home. We packed our belongings, and as we left the room we could hear sounds from downstairs almost as if a cocktail party was in progress, with lots of people talking loudly and the sound of clinking glass. As soon as my husband shut the bedroom door, the noises stopped. We gave each other a puzzled look and shrugged it off. Being good forteans, we are looking forward to visiting this inn again!

Georgina Mcleod
Grayslake, Illinois

At some point in the night I had a very clear, very lucid dream in which my bedside phone rang

Post mortem phone call

Many years ago I was supposed to visit a friend, who I'll call John, and his family. Unfortunately, they cancelled unexpectedly and I was disappointed. I hadn't seen my friend for some time, and I suspected he was having difficulties that he wanted to discuss.

Maybe a week later, I learned that he had been kicked out of the family home by his wife. She had been having an affair, so I had likely picked up on this troubling atmosphere. I tried to track him down, but in the days before mobile phones, this was impossible. His wife phoned me a few days later to tell me John had taken his own life in despair, and I was distraught.

I couldn't bring myself to visit his wife, as she had already moved the new man in, and I struggled with her role in his death. As much as I wanted to pay my last respects and see the children, I didn't want to face her. The night before the funeral I lit a candle on the window sill, had a glass of wine and said my goodbyes to John out loud and went to bed.

At some point in the night I had a very clear, very lucid dream, in which my bedside phone, a landline, rang. I answered it and it was John, as clear as day. He told me he was sorry for leaving, but that he had no choice, and that he knew I wasn't going to the funeral. I asked John if he wanted me to go, and he said that he wouldn't be there, so there was no point. He explained that he was happy now, and that he would always be able to watch over his two children. He told me not to feel guilty, that I would never have been able to alter the course of events. He said he had to go, and we said our heartfelt goodbyes. I cried a little, and I put the phone on the bedside table, not on the phone cradle, as I didn't want to hang up on him.

The next morning I woke up without the alarm and I felt calmer than I had done for weeks. I felt some closure and that on some level I had said goodbye to John, even if it was only in a dream. Then I noticed the phone was not on the cradle.

Caitlin Warrior
Huddersfield, West Yorkshire

Timeslip/ migraine

In response to the missive from Lewis JW Hurst, regarding timeslips and migraines [**FT458:65**]: I have the opportunity to reply, having had migraines on and off since 1981 and also having experienced a timeslip in the late 1990s.

I've also noted a similar smell of fried onions or vinegar prior to migraine, although generally there are more significant physical symptoms which presage an event (such as irritability or feeling lachrymose).

There is a mediæval tradition of clergy/nuns experiencing migraine in places of worship and attributing the associated visualisations (caused by pressure on the back of an optic nerve) to spiritual visitation.

Regarding timeslips, one of which I was lucky enough to experience, mine involved my travelling down a street which gradually "went back" in time as I drove further on (I was on an old motorbike with an open face helmet). The buildings either side began to change from the modern/derelict structures as they had been at the time – into functional industrial/factory buildings which I understand they were in the 1960s. Of note was that the Sun had moved from one part of the sky to the opposite side (my right, moving to my left).

On an olfactory basis, the air became quite gritty and smoky, as you'd expect with such an environment – and that once I'd moved on from the area of the timeslip, it returned to as it should be as did recognisable buildings.

A question of interest for myself is, do 'spirits/ghosts' have an odour? Having had many ghost-sightings over the years, I can only recall one particular example where I experienced 'smell'. This being the ragged figure of a man walking ahead of me, whilst heading home one evening. He seemed to be 'out of place' with the environment and wearing clothing that was impossibly torn and filthy looking. If he was from this world, I'm sure I would've remembered seeing him before.

The smell that lingered behind him however was like nothing I'd ever encountered. Try to imagine an old bottle of smelling salts combined with overpowering ammonia. It really reached into my throat and made me gag (despite his being several feet ahead of me at this point). Literally it was a smell of 'death' that grabbed me and left my throat burning and my legs buckled.

I've since read of similar incidents occurring to other people.

And, yes it could be argued that this may have been a homeless person, but the stench was such that I doubt anyone would be able to endure it, let alone create it. I've worked with or been otherwise involved with homeless people over the years and have never experienced anything like this.

Has anyone else ever experienced such an incident? Not the spurious 'whiff' of tobacco smell which is often retained in the fabric of a building (and released following atmospheric conditions), but an olfactory assault accompanied by a visual experience?

Gordon A Wallace

Smethwick, West Midlands

Haunted alarm clock?

I'm a newbie to the *Fortean Times,* but my boyfriend has been a long-time subscriber and since we started our relationship he reads *'It happened to me'* while we have our morning cuppa in bed.

My mum passed away in 2022, after a few months battling cancer. I had lived with her and my stepdad for the past 20 years so it was a difficult time, but I was glad to be here when she finally died.

In the last few weeks of her life, she would set her old alarm clock to get up at 4am to take the morphine she required. She needed to do this or would not be able to get up in the morning without terrible pain. Her birthday was in June and I wanted to get her something cute, but useful too, and bought her a little mint green alarm clock. She only used it for a few weeks as she died in July. The clock remained on the bedside cabinet on her side of the bed where it is still today.

Sometime in the 1950s she was given a little gold signet ring with her initial on by my grandmother. As long as I have been alive it has been broken, having been cut off of her finger when it became too small for her. In 2024, a couple of years after she died, I decided to have it repaired and wear it as a memento, as we share the same initial. I picked up the ring from the jewellers when it was fixed and settled down that night to sleep wearing my new ring.

In the middle of the night I woke in a panic, a bit confused at first as to what had woken me up. Hearing a noise, I went onto the landing. The noise was coming from my stepdad's room; I quietly entered as I heard him snoring. I saw he was fast asleep tucked up on his side of the bed. I stepped into the room and towards the noise. On the floor in the bedroom about 15 feet (4.6m) from the bed was the little mint green alarm clock ringing its head off! I switched it off and replaced it on what was my mum's side of the bed while my stepdad snored away, having not woken.

The clock had neither been set nor had rung for almost two years. We don't know why it went off or why it was in the middle of the room. Although it was a shock, I found it quite curious and fun. Was my mum watching over me and sending a noisy celebration over the ring? The little clock sits happily on the bedside cabinet and has not made a sound or movement since.

Emma Sheehan

By email

Was my mum watching over me and sending a noisy celebration over the ring?

Phantom nurse?

I've worked for the NHS for more than 20 years. Although I have worked in different hospitals in that time, I've mostly worked in one particular hospital (in Brighton) which used to be the local workhouse.

My building does not have any wards anymore; just admin and clinics so early in the morning and later in the day it is almost empty. There have always been stories about spooky goings-on in the various buildings on this hospital site, but I am convinced that there is some presence. This benign presence has in the past wiped the answer phone messages, turned on computer monitors (once whilst I was standing right there), crashed my computer until an annoying, hovering manager left so that I could get on with my work without being watched, and silently, but firmly, made my screen go blank so I gave up the ghost (no pun intended) and went home, presumably since she thought I was staying too late (it is rumoured that the presence is a nurse still patrolling the wards, now long gone).

During lock-down I continued to go into work but occupied an office, at the end of the finance corridor, so that the few of us on the corridor maintained a safe distance. Knowing exactly who was on the corridor made the footsteps up and down it more obvious, especially when it wasn't any of us! It wasn't any one from the floor below either (I checked). When I was working in my own office (on my own) I got more than one call from a colleague working remotely asking if I would go down to the end office and switch the computers back on. This office was locked and the few other people that had a key knew the computers had to be left on, so had not tampered with them. Our other-worldly, friendly presence is very conscientious but never rests.

Su Owen, neé Deighton

Brighton, East Sussex

Waking dreams?

About eight years ago I started to experience what I can only describe as waking dreams when I shut my eyes, either lying in bed or sitting on the couch watching TV. These would usually occur after a long day at work or when I had missed some sleep the night before. I would be fully aware of my surroundings and in some cases carrying on a conversation with my wife, so I know I hadn't dropped off.

The first time was when I was sitting on the couch talking about my day. I shut my eyes and began watching a car journey from the perspective of the driver on a familiar road in the area. The hills were lit up with hundreds of red lights and I said to my wife "You won't believe what I'm looking at". She humoured me with a "that's amazing" and went about her business.

As time went on things got a bit stranger. A square screen would form and random images of people and places sometimes moving at double speed would appear, occasionally an image would morph into a highly detailed picture more real than real. They are always random and have no meaning to me, and I find I can stop them just by thinking about it. Up to now I've had around 60 such episodes.

The point of this letter is to find out if anyone else has experienced this and if it is quite common. Does it explain mystical visions and the like?

Andrew Clarke

By email

LETTERS

Phantom baby

This is a true story from my partner Shirley who has only recently retired after many years working for London Underground. In about 2006 she was working at Barbican Underground station. A member of the public reported that she could hear the sound of a baby crying on one of the platforms. A search revealed no baby or evidence of one. Then later that week another person reported hearing a baby crying, but couldn't work out where the noise was coming from. Another search revealed nothing.

It wasn't long after that Shirley, while working on the platform, also heard a baby noise herself. This time it sounded like a snuffling gurgling baby type noise – but bizarrely she could have sworn the noise was coming from the tannoy system! It made no sense as there were no babies in the offices or control room. As more members of the public were getting concerned and were asking worriedly about the distressed baby, staff were considering if a real baby was in danger somewhere or was it a paranormal manifestation?

Shirley, being sceptical of both suggestions, asked LU engineers to investigate the actual Tannoy system itself, which was new. Shirley, doubting it was paranormal and wanting a scientific answer, had the thought that one of the new Barbican flats – that had been built nearby recently – might have a baby monitor in the flat that was being picked up by the station's radio system. And that is what it turned out to be! The same frequency was being used by the station radio system and one of the new flats' baby monitors, and it was being picked up and broadcast on the station tannoy. The Underground engineers simply changed the station radio frequency to another channel and the 'phantom baby' disappeared.

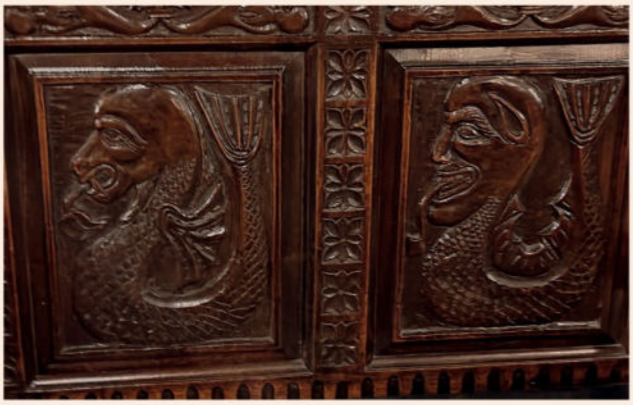
So if you were a Barbican commuter in about 2006 who thought you heard a ghostly baby crying, I'm sorry to disappoint you. Sometimes there is a rational but weird explanation (unfortunately!).

Cathy Peake
Norfolk

Mermaids?

In a delightful moment of synchronicity, I'd just finished reading the article on the Deerness Mermaid and headed out to meet some friends at a local wine bar, the Mug House under London Bridge. The table we sat at had a carved antique hall bench with four images of what look to me like rather demonic mermaids. I've attached a detail of a couple of them. Do others agree they are mermaids or are they some other mythical creature? Anyone local who'd like to see the bench for themselves, it's the first table to the right as you go in the door. And I'd recommend the Rioja!

Tony Ruben
Bermondsey, London



Deerness Mermaid

Simon Young does an excellent job in summarising all the available evidence of sightings in the 1890s of the so-called 'Deerness Mermaid' and concludes that it was probably some form of seal, possibly an abnormal specimen [**FT458:36-41**].

At the risk of straying into territory outside my experience, may I tentatively suggest one possibility which he did not consider: could it have perhaps have been a sea otter? Judging by Wikipedia's article, it seems that the sea otter shares a number of characteristics with the most reliable descriptions of the mermaid as listed by Mr Young.

These include the following: A somewhat human-like face and a head comparable to a polar bear.

A long (or at least an obvious) neck, unlike a seal.

An estimated length of between five and ten feet (1.5–3m). Female sea otters apparently top out at 4'7", but extend their long rear legs backwards when swimming).

A dark back with white neck, chest and belly, possibly mottled in one description.

Abundant hair (or fur), visible when the head is shaken out of the water after a long dive.

The ability to make long dives, staying underwater for five minutes or maybe more.

Often floating or swimming on its back.

Never seen on land (sea otters have occasionally been seen on land but walking is difficult; they can stay in the water for life).
Eats fish and other seafood.
A variety of vocal behaviours.
Spends much time alone but can be playful and sociable.
Waves and works its hands (sea otters are one of the few mammal species to use tools; sea otters catch fish with their hands and forepaws and make extensive use of them when eating while floating on their backs).
The mermaid lived from at least 1890 to 1899 (female sea otters can live 15-20 years)

It had a single pup ('baby'), not a litter.

There are of course a number of possible objections to this identification.

Firstly, the sea otter has whiskers, which were never mentioned in connection with the 'mermaid' – but that might have spoilt the 'ladylike' description!

Secondly, the pup or baby appeared in the third year after it was first seen; if it was a lone animal and it did not breed with another of its kind, this could possibly be explained by the sea otter's ability to delay implantation (embryonic diapause) before completing a 4-month gestation period, although two years delay is somewhat longer than has been observed in other sea otters.

Thirdly, like manatees, sea otters are not native to British waters; in fact they occur in the northern and eastern coastal areas of the North Pacific. If the mermaid was a sea otter, then one would have to assume that it had been captured – possibly already pregnant but delaying implantation – in the North Pacific by a sailing vessel crew who then released it near the Orkney Isles. This at least would be consistent with the fact that none of the local fishermen could recognise it.

Whether the Deerness Mermaid was in fact a sea otter remains a very open question, but perhaps a reader with more specialist knowledge might like to comment on the possibility.

Bob Johnson
By email

CLIVE GODDARD

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WHY FORTEAN?

FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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Fortean Traveller

146. Froggyland, Diocletian's Palace, Split

RYAN SHIRLOW heads to the Adriatic port of Split where he explores the palace of the Emperor Diocletian before discovering the work of Croatia's answer to Walter Potter and his 507 surviving stuffed frogs...

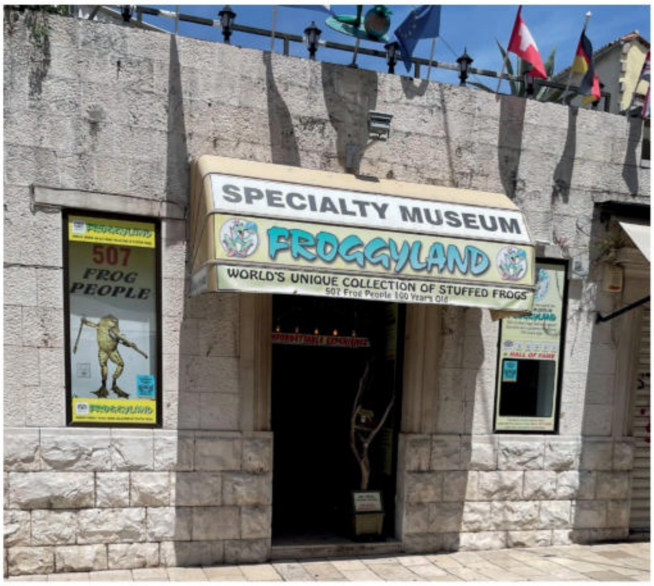
The ancient city of Split lies on the Croatian coast of the Adriatic, at the political and economic heart of the old Roman province of Dalmatia. The Emperor Diocletian built his vast retirement palace here in the third century, and much of the old town lies within its enormous limestone walls and arches.

The palace boasts a long and complex history; like the city itself, it has remained in constant use for over 1,700 years. Its winding streets navigate the mismatched and collapsing architecture and are filled with little boutiques, cafes serving fish risotto, and sheltered courtyards where the locals sip *rakijia*, the strong liquor made from grapes, plums, walnuts, or seemingly anything else the locals can distil.

The overwhelming impression is that modern European civilisation is only camping in the great ruins of an Empire which might have fallen yesterday. What monolithic works will we leave for our descendants to turn into hipster restaurants or cut-price holiday destinations?

The vaulted halls beneath the palace provide some much-needed respite from the Mediterranean sun, though perhaps you should simply spare yourself the intensity of the archæological tour and its badly translated placards. Suffice to say that any one of the hundreds of exquisitely carved stone blocks you come across might once have topped a Byzantine archway, been incorporated into a mediæval cistern, been smashed and damaged in some forgotten Balkan war… The sheer breadth of human history is just too much to take in on a casual visit.

PHOTOS: RYAN SHIRLOW



SPECIALTY MUSEUM
FROGGYLAND
WORLD'S UNIQUE COLLECTION OF STUFFED FROGS
507 Frog People 100 Years Old
507 FROG PEOPLE
FROGGYLAND

ABOVE: The palace and old town are a bewildering clash of architectural styles, with arches, windows and alcoves that would give MC Escher a headache. **LEFT:** Froggyland is located just behind the palace; most rambles through the disjointed streets will lead you mysteriously back here.

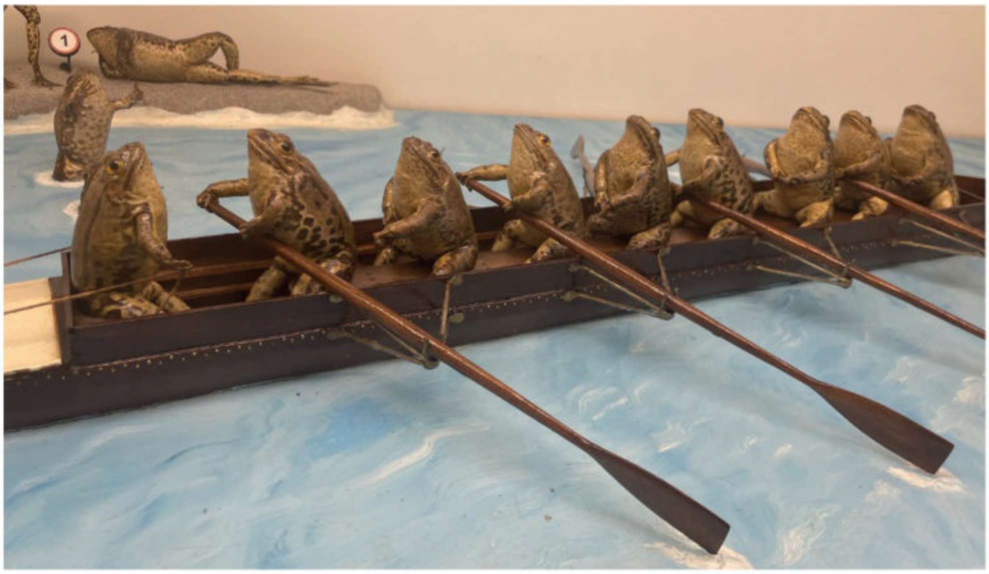
Perhaps it is not surprising that many tourists opt for a simpler, fantasy timeline and join the *Game of Thrones* TV Experience instead. Here you can learn which epic pieces of real-world history formed a background to the small screen drama.

> *His collection ran to 1,000 stuffed and mounted frogs*

It was my wife's idea to come on this extraordinary journey; she had boasted to my parents that we were "going to *split* in June" – they showed no surprise at this potentially devastating news – and it was also her suggestion that I might visit one of the city's more fortean attractions while she went shopping.

The International Museum of Amphibian Taxidermy, better known as "Froggyland", lies just behind the main palace complex. It showcases the work of Hungarian outsider artist Ferenc Mere in a series of cabinets, each recreating in miniature a scene from daily life in the late 19th century: blacksmiths, carpenters, a dentist, a school, a circus and various other jaunty scenarios – all populated with anthropomorphised amphibians.

Mere's collection originally ran to 1,000 frogs, which he stuffed and mounted over a period of 10 years. Despite being over a century old the surviving 507 frogs are in generally excellent condition; I counted only one that had its leg reattached with electrical tape. The museum boasts that another master of taxidermy, Francois Perrier, stuffed only 108 frogs, while famous English artist Walter Potter (see **FT306:36-41**), whose work this most resembles,



RYAN SHIRLOW

FROGGYLAND
WORLD'S UNIQUE 100 OLD YEARS COLLECTION OF STUFFED FROGS

ABOVE LEFT: I managed to take a single photo of these rowing frogs before incurring the wrath of the proprietress. Fortunately, the hasty purchase of some reasonably priced postcards (above right and below) avoided the attention of the Croatian (or should that be Croakian?) constabulary.

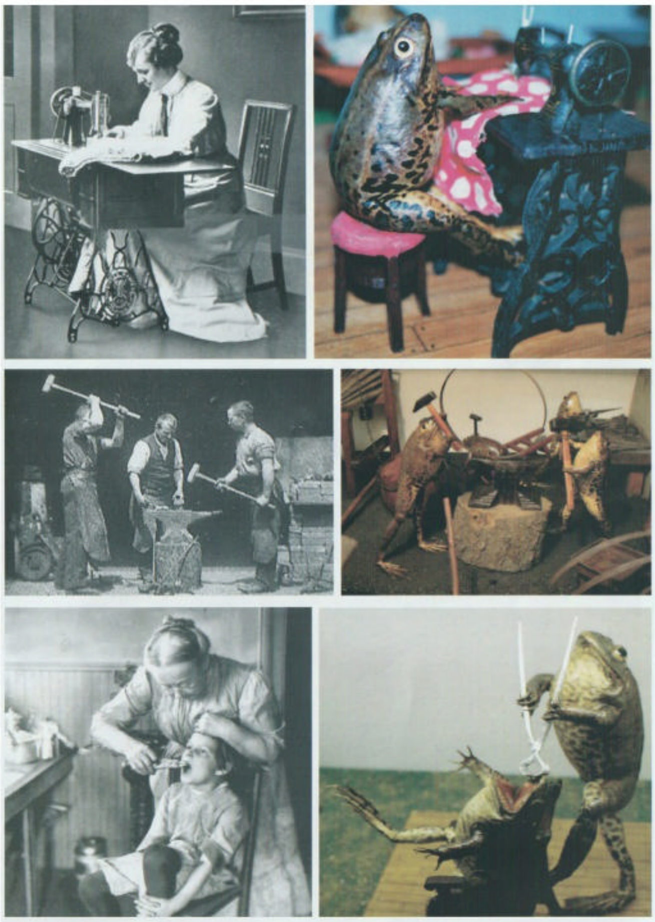
managed a meagre 79.

Little biographical information on Mere is available either in the museum or online, though we do know that he invented his own technique, stuffing the frogs with cork and sawdust through their mouths so that no ugly stitches are visible on the surface.

Charles Fort was a big fan of out-of-place frogs and would perhaps have enjoyed this excursion, especially as it would not have distracted him long from his researches. For the cost of 15 euros, and as many minutes of my time, I passed around all the exhibits twice.

After my second lap I was chased out by the formidable Croat curator shouting "No photo! No photo!" over the thumping background music: Belinda Carlisle's "Heaven is a Place on Earth", which had been overlaid with sampled croaking noises. I have included here pictures from the museum's promotional materials and the various postcards I hastily purchased in order to avoid further trouble. More pictures are available on the Froggyland website and in an article in the *Daily Mail.* [2]

I am sympathetic to the museum for preserving Mere's unique labour and I fear that as Split completes its transformation into a generic tourist trap, sideshows such as Froggyland will only get squeezed out. Indeed, the museum was reportedly nearly closed and sent to America during the pandemic.[3] So if you want to support their efforts and ensure the survival of a tiny oasis of gently exploitative fairground weirdness, then do pay them a visit.



WORLD'S UNIQUE 100 OLD YEARS COLLECTION OF STUFFED FROGS
FROGGYLAND
OPTUŽENI
SVIJEDOCI

Split also serves as an excellent hopping-off point to visit the wider Balkan hinterland. During our explorations we watched the young *mostari* leap from the reconstructed Ottoman bridge in war-torn Mostar and paddled like pollywogs in the stunning Kravica waterfalls of Herzegovina. Day trips are also available to join the chorus praying to the Virgin Mary at Medjugorje. [4]

During the tourist season the city gets very hot and very busy, and out of season a lot of the local facilities actually close down, so I would recommend beating the summer rush with a visit in late May/early June or leaving it until October.

NOTES

1 https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-hungarian-taxidermist-who-saw-frogs-as-people

2 https://froggyland.net/; https://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/travel_news/article-3710282/Hop-Inside-bizarre-taxidermy-museum-500-stuffed-frogs-seen-playing-tennis-going-school-performing-circus-acts.html

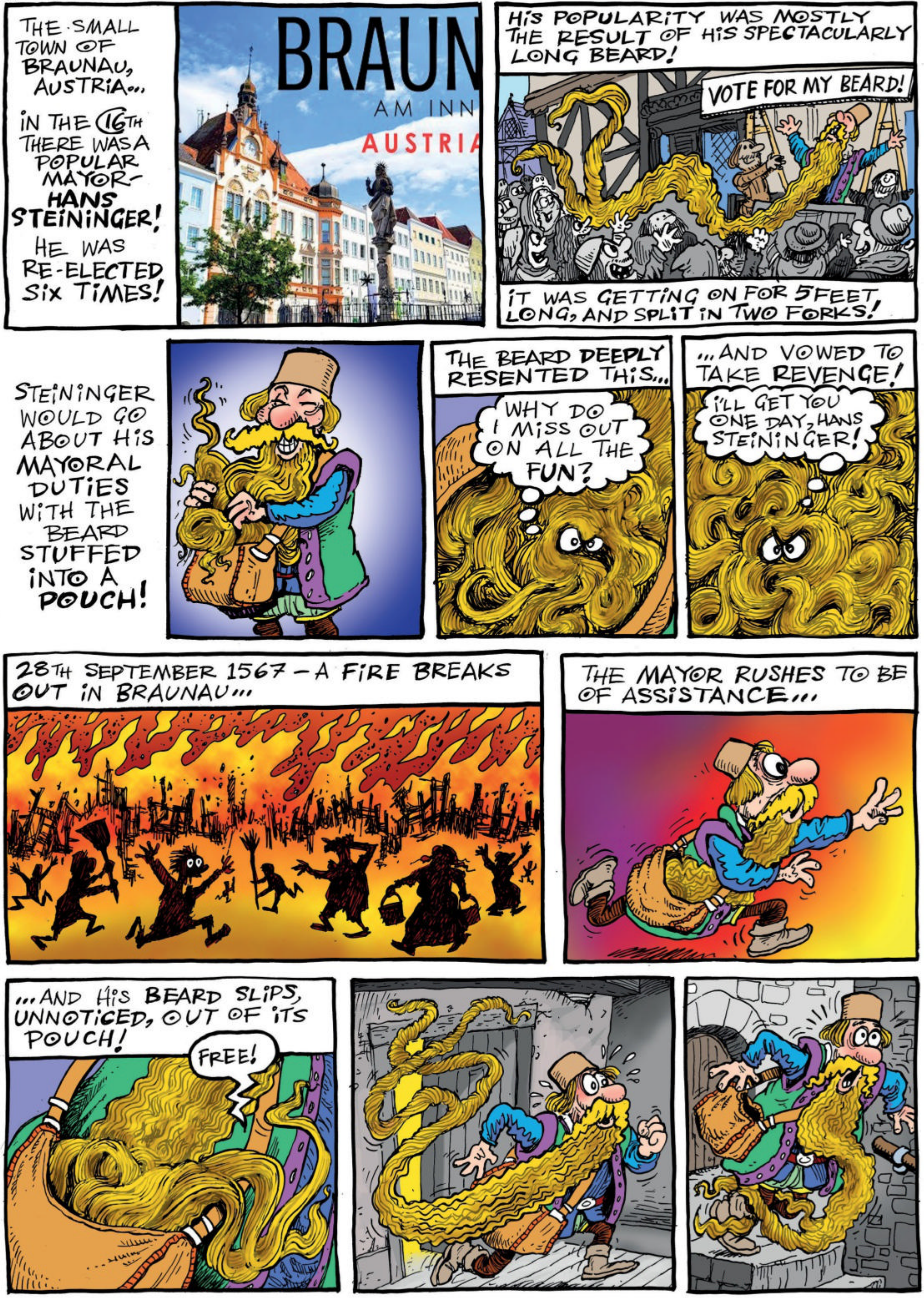
3 https://www.npr.org/2021/06/10/1000842832/welcome-to-froggyland-the-croatian-taxidermy-museum-that-may-soon-come-to-the-u-

4 The website https://www.medjugorje.org/ contains a comprehensive list of alleged messages received from the Blessed Virgin, the most recent at the time of writing was in May 2024.

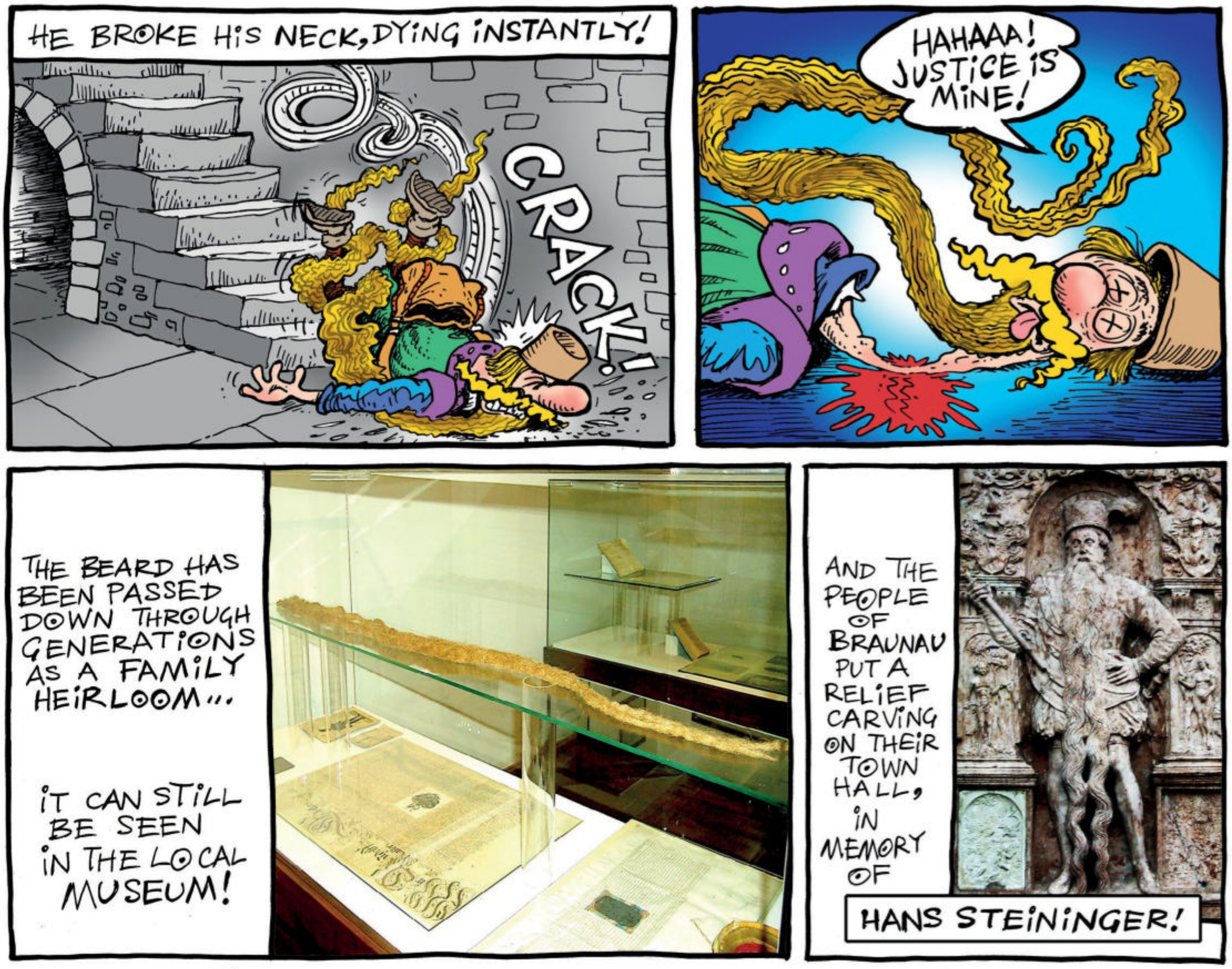
RYAN SHIRLOW is a Northern Irish writer, musician and fortean. His new audio drama, *The Automatic Leprechaun*, is available at ryanshirlow.bandcamp.com.

PHENOMENOMIX

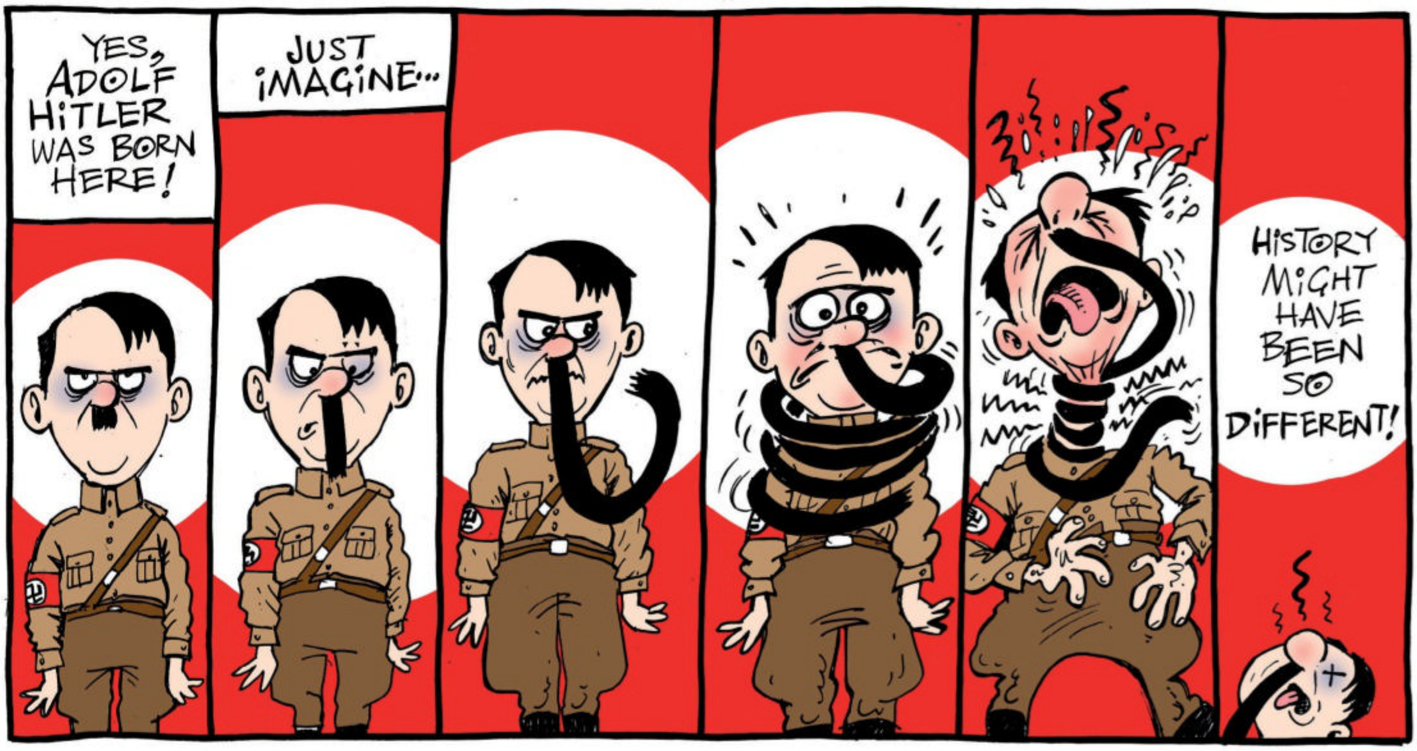
MURDER BY BEARD.


THE SMALL TOWN OF BRAUNAU, AUSTRIA...
IN THE 16TH THERE WAS A POPULAR MAYOR- HANS STEININGER!
HE WAS RE-ELECTED SIX TIMES!
BRAUN
AM INN
AUSTRIA
HIS POPULARITY WAS MOSTLY THE RESULT OF HIS SPECTACULARLY LONG BEARD!
VOTE FOR MY BEARD!
IT WAS GETTING ON FOR 5 FEET LONG, AND SPLIT IN TWO FORKS!
STEININGER WOULD GO ABOUT HIS MAYORAL DUTIES WITH THE BEARD STUFFED INTO A POUCH!
THE BEARD DEEPLY RESENTED THIS...
WHY DO I MISS OUT ON ALL THE FUN?
...AND VOWED TO TAKE REVENGE!
I'LL GET YOU ONE DAY, HANS STEININGER!
28TH SEPTEMBER 1567 – A FIRE BREAKS OUT IN BRAUNAU...
THE MAYOR RUSHES TO BE OF ASSISTANCE...
...AND HIS BEARD SLIPS, UNNOTICED, OUT OF ITS POUCH!
FREE!

HUNT EMERSON & ROB GANDY


HE BROKE HIS NECK, DYING INSTANTLY!
CRACK!
HAHAAA! JUSTICE IS MINE!
THE BEARD HAS BEEN PASSED DOWN THROUGH GENERATIONS AS A FAMILY HEIRLOOM...
IT CAN STILL BE SEEN IN THE LOCAL MUSEUM!
AND THE PEOPLE OF BRAUNAU PUT A RELIEF CARVING ON THEIR TOWN HALL, IN MEMORY OF
HANS STEININGER!

THERE IS ANOTHER WHISKERS-RELATED HISTORICAL FIGURE FROM BRAUNAU...


YES, ADOLF HITLER WAS BORN HERE!
JUST IMAGINE...
HISTORY MIGHT HAVE BEEN SO DIFFERENT!

COMING NEXT MONTH

LAYING PLUCKLEY'S GHOSTS

THE TRUTH ABOUT BRITAIN'S MOST HAUNTED VILLAGE

THERE'S A RIOT GOING ON!

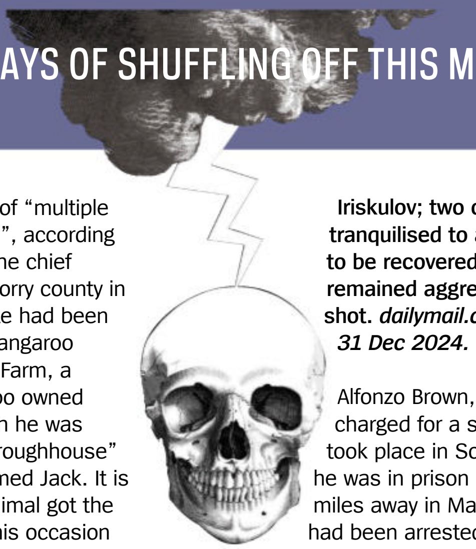
EELS, DARTS AND OPERA: UNLIKELY ORIGINS OF CIVIL DISORDER

BLAZING HOUSEWIVES,
STONE GHOST GIRL,
MIDSOMER MURDERS,
AND MUCH MORE...

FORTEAN TIMES 461 ON SALE 7 AUG 2025

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



Eric Slate, 52, died of "multiple blunt [force] injuries", according to Tamara Willard, the chief deputy coroner of Horry county in South Carolina. Slate had been found dead in the kangaroo enclosure of 5 Star Farm, a children's petting zoo owned by his brother, which he was known to enter to "roughhouse" with a kangaroo named Jack. It is believed that the animal got the better of Slate on this occasion and had kicked him to death with its powerful back legs, although the Horry county police department said that, "The death investigation remains active and ongoing." Despite their size, strength and propensity for boxing, deaths by kangaroo are surprisingly rare, although an Australian man was killed by a pet roo in 2022; before that the last recorded death took place in 1938. *theguardian.com, 12 May 2025.*

Death by lion is, regrettably, more frequent. Fifty-year-old Aqil Fakhr al-Din, from Kufa in Najaf, Iraq, had kept a collection of wild animals in his garden for several years, according to neighbours, but things went seriously wrong when he decided to add a lion to his menagerie. Only days after he had bought the animal, with the intention of taming and raising it, the lion turned on al-Din and savagely attacked him, dragging him screaming around the garden. A neighbour tried to drive the beast off, but it would not retreat, standing over al-Din and eating parts of his body until the man pumped it full of bullets from a Kalashnikov. Amazingly, al-Din survived the assault for long enough to be taken to hospital, despite having had a significant proportion of his body eaten by the lion, but could not be saved due to the extent of his injuries.

Also ending up on the wrong side of some lions was a zookeeper in Uzbekistan, named as F Iriskulov, 44, who filmed himself entering a cage containing three lions "to impress his girlfriend". Iriskulov can be heard calling out to the lions to remain calm, but one can be seen licking its lips, then leaping at him, and, although the video goes dark at that point, Iriskulov can still be heard screaming as the other lions join in to eat him alive. According to media reports, the lions "tore the skin off the guard's face", then "killed him and partially consumed his body". The attack was not discovered by zoo staff for four hours, after which not much was left of Iriskulov; two of the lions were tranquilised to allow his remains to be recovered, but the third remained aggressive and had to be shot. *dailymail.co.uk, 12 May 2025, 31 Dec 2024.*

Alfonzo Brown, 66, ended up being charged for a shotgun murder that took place in South Carolina while he was in prison several hundred miles away in Maryland, where he had been arrested for a non-fatal triple shooting. Knowing that his uncle was in custody, Brown's nephew, Jordan Dove, 34, had gone to check that his house in Saint Matthews, South Carolina, hadn't been burgled or vandalised, accompanied by his teenage daughter. As they opened the back door to the property, Dove's daughter said she heard sounds "similar to fireworks" and saw her father collapse with gunshot wounds. She called emergency services, and despite prompt treatment by paramedics, Dove died on the way to hospital. Investigating, police found that Brown had barricaded the property's front door and installed a booby trap on the back door. He had fixed a shotgun to the wall and wedged a pipe between the trigger and the door so that when it was opened, this would fire the gun. Police believe that when he left for Maryland, Brown was intent on committing a crime, and believed that police seeking him would visit the house, so he set up the trap for them, which Dove triggered instead. In addition to charges relating to the Maryland shooting, Brown has now been charged with Dove's murder and the possession of a weapon by a convicted felon. *wcax.com, 4 Mar 2025.*

Paul Banning was taking part in a game fishing tournament off the coast of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia, when he was killed by a shark. He had hooked a large mako shark and was struggling to reel it in with the help of three other people, but as they pulled it alongside the boat, the fish suddenly dived at high speed. This caught Banning by surprise, and as the shark plunged into the depths, it dragged his fishing gear with it. The flailing gear tangled around Banning's legs and he was pulled overboard and under the water after the fleeing shark. Banning, 58, was not wearing a life jacket, and did not resurface, and his body could not be found despite the 40 boats taking part abandoning the competition to search for him. *Courier-Mail (Queensland), 25 Feb 2025.*

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